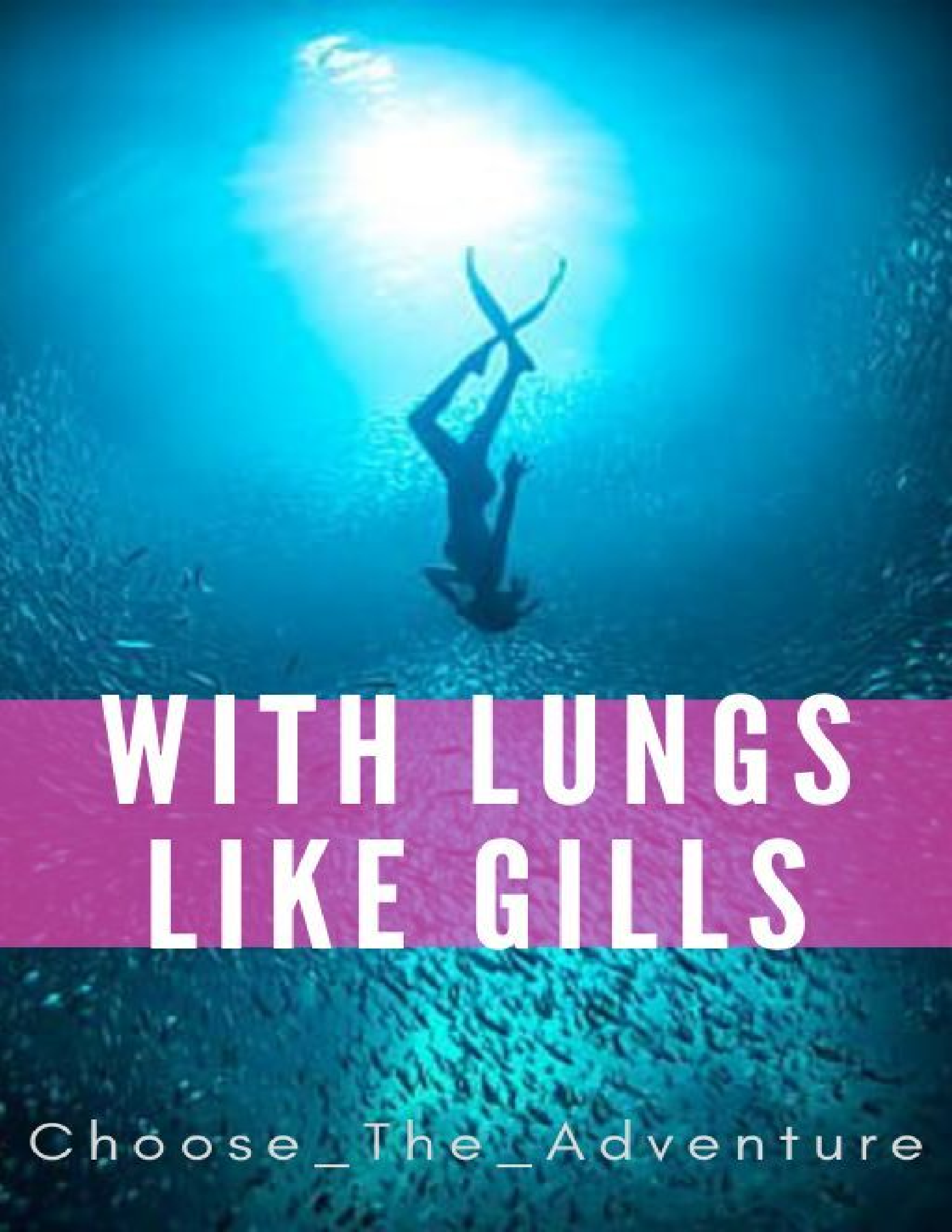

WITH LUNGS LIKE GILLS

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Chapter 1

I've lived by the sea my entire life, and take it with me within a small glass vial necklace that had a red stone within the contained salty water. I was a semi-professional freediver with a large lung capacity and a licensed scuba diver -- so why was I losing the battle to hold my breath, and why was the surface of the water moving so far away from my reach?

The pressure on my left ankle was harsh, as if something was trying to pull me towards wherever it considered to be safe further down, and I held onto whatever air remained in my lungs as I frantically grabbed for the diving knife tucked away underneath my swim shorts. With the button clasp undone, I gripped the hilt tightly in my shaking hands and drove it from the sheath by my hip straight into whatever was holding onto my ankle. With the sound of rushing water thundering at my ears, I stabbed downwards over and over until the force let go, a monstrous shriek pierced the water as my lungs started to beg for fresh air. Driving whatever energy I could muster into kicking myself upwards through the dark water, I could barely see the sunset that was so bright only a few moments ago on the surface.

How far down am I?

Shoving the diving knife back into its sheath, I focused on moving upward as quickly as possible, refusing to let panic steal what little air I had left. I couldn't pay attention to anything else, or I'd get dragged back down again.

I grabbed onto the coral rock face that overhung the deep dropoff I was pulled into, pushing down on it to propel myself up further. I felt the coral cut into my bare hand, clenching my teeth in pain and continuing to focus on moving up towards the water's surface as adrenaline surged through my nerves.

Only five more meters...come on, (y/n), you can do this!

My legs ached, my arms were becoming numb, and my lungs had clearly reached their limit a while ago. I pushed another kick out before my vision darkened and my body became completely numb.

The convulsion in my chest caused me to spit out whatever water I had inhaled, and I felt someone hurriedly roll me onto my left side, their hand on my right shoulder and back to stabilize my position. I coughed out what felt like several litres of water before I was able to breathe freely again, wincing at the salty taste in my mouth that the ocean always left.

"You feeling better?" A male voice asked from close behind me, more than likely the same person that was keeping me on my side. I was grateful that someone came across my body when I was washed ashore, before I suddenly realized that I shouldn't have come ashore at all.

Wasn't I still five meters underwater? The current should've taken me out to sea.

"Yeah," I coughed a final time before sitting up on my own. I felt the cool water underneath me as it washed across the rocky tide pool barrier, and I turned to see a man that was mostly submerged in the evening waters. His dark-colored hair was soaked completely through and he wore a very lavish-looking headpiece, complete with bleached seashells and red fins near where his ears were. Around his neck, he had a pearled necklace that had bits of red coral, which somehow weren't irritating his bare skin.

"Ah, thanks for finding me," I gave a grateful nod, not wanting to ask why he was still in the water.

"No problem," He laughed a little before pausing a bit, "Are you gonna give me a kiss in return?"

"What?!" My brow instantly furrowed in disgust as I moved away from him a little, "No way! I don't know you, and we've only just met."

"You're no fun. I save you from drowning and I don't get anything in return," He held his arms behind his head and pouted, treading water without making much of a splash.

"If you want a reward, it can't be anything like that off the bat," I crossed my legs and noticed the hand-sized bruise beginning to darken around my ankle, "I...uh, I mean, if you want to actually get a reward from me, you have to start out small."

"Then have sex with me!" The pout on his face instantly turned into a wide and understanding smirk.

"No!" I shouted in surprise, starting to get frustrated with the man, "No, sex is not smaller than a kiss! I meant like a ice cream, or something else that we could both enjoy without physical contact!"

Silence settled between us, the sound of waves crashing against the nearby sandy shores serving as ambient noise. I took a few silent deep breaths to calm myself down before I heard the man starting to laugh -- softly at first, eventually growing to be so loud that I thought he would draw the attention of the nearby fishermen on the rocky outcrops. After he laughed himself out, the man looked at me with a serious grin.

"All right. Then I choose ice cream, or something else that's simple and can be enjoyed right here on the shoreline."

"Very well then," I pushed myself up slowly, letting my limbs stretch out, "I'll head down to the local creamery shop and get us something to eat," I gave a soft smile to the man and reached down to him, intending to help him out of the water.

"Ah...no, I still need to do my laps. My brother will be furious if I skip out on lessons," He shook his head and jabbed a thumb back out towards the open water, "I'll wait for you here...uh..."

"(L/n). (L/n) (Y/n)," I stood up straight and looked expectantly back at him.

"Uh...Yamano."

"All right, Yamano. I'll be back in about ten minutes. Think you'll have your laps finished by then?"

"If not, then soon after. I'm pretty fast," Yamano gave me a 'V' with his index and middle finger before waving me off as I turned around and headed towards my favorite little hole-in-the-wall ice cream shop, double checking that I had all of my gear on me. About halfway to the shop, I slapped my forehead lightly as I grimaced.

I should've asked Yamano what flavor he wanted...

Chapter 2

With a bag partially filled with two take-out containers of different flavored monaka in hand, I walked back to where the tide pool was and watched in silence as the sun finally dipped beneath the horizon, casting a brilliant orange and red glow in the sky. Yamano wasn't around, but he had warned me that he would be finished quickly if I came back to no one here.

Sitting near the water's edge, I crossed my legs underneath and took out a chestnut paste monaka from one of the containers, eating it as I watched the darkening water for Yamano. I was expecting him to be swimming actual laps, but with no one on the surface, I guessed that he had meant something else entirely.

I had just finished my treat before I saw him break the surface nearby, his hair covering most of his face before he pushed most of it back with a hand.

"Yamano! I got you some monaka, but only in the standard flavors as I forgot to ask what flavor of ice cream you wanted," I lifted the bag towards him before putting it in my lap, digging out the plastic container with his two snacks, "There's red bean and vanilla. If you don't want either of those, I have a strawberry one as well."

"Oh, thanks. I'm good with whatever you got me," He did a few breaststrokes towards the tide pool rock barrier before disappearing under the water. The next thing I knew, he rocketed out of the ocean and plopped down next to me on my left, splashing water all over me and the container. Thankfully, I hadn't opened his container yet.

"Geez...why'd you do that?" I handed him his container before looking at my own to see the remaining strawberry monaka ruined by salt water. A slight frown crossed my lips before I closed my own container and shoved it back into the bag with a silent huff.

"Sorry, it's really the only way I can get up on land without looking weird or dumb," Yamano grinned as he took a large bite out of the vanilla monaka. I glanced down towards his legs and was greeted with prominent red scales that were occasionally broken up by white stripes.

Scales?

Without thinking, I reached towards the scales covering his right thigh and lightly brushed my fingertips across them. They felt smooth, and weren't as rubbery as I thought silicone would feel. I went to touch the lionfish-like fins laying flat near Yamano's knees, but he grabbed my hand before I could reach them. I barely missed the wide-eyed emotionless stare Yamano had as he gripped my hand tightly, the pain causing me to wince.

"Ah, sorry! I should've asked first," I pulled my hand away with an embarrassed smile across my face, cursing myself for getting carried away by the realistic details in the silicone tail. If I owned a tail as elaborate as that one, I'd want someone to ask first; but here I was, touching without asking just like a hypocrite.

"It's no problem. That fin can be pretty finicky," Yamano responded after a small pause, grinning at me, "I didn't show you this earlier because I didn't want you screaming in your delirium."

"Well, it looks really well-crafted! I've always wanted to swim with a silicone mermaid tail, but they've always been so expensive. I just make do with my free-diving fins," I looked back down at the silicone tail, admiring the handiwork, "It really does make you look like a lionfish merman!"

Yamano stayed silent for a few seconds before smirking widely, "I know, right? I've been swimming with this for pretty much my whole life, so I've gotten used to how cool it looks on me."

The lights on the street far from the water turned on, and I briefly looked towards the right to see the beach patrol begin to make its way up and down the shoreline, "It's that time already?"

"What d'ya mean?" Yamano stuffed the last of his treat into his mouth, crunching the shell as he spoke.

"The beach here closes at sunset. I've got work in the morning, so I usually head home when the beach patrol comes out at night," I offered the open bag towards him so he could throw his empty container in as trash.

"Aww, that sucks. I live right on the coast, so I don't bother to walk here," He tossed it in and I stood up, rubbing the loose bits of rock off my legs and stretched.

"Are you going to be okay swimming in the dark waters?" I raised an eyebrow at his comment.

"I do it all the time. It's no big deal," Yamano gave me a thumbs up before looking at me with a quizzical glance in his eyes, "What are your plans for tomorrow? Do you come here often?"

"Yeah, I try to come here every day after work if I'm not scheduled for a dive tour."

"Great! Maybe we can swim together? I can save you from drowning again," He threw a small flirtatious look at me, and I couldn't help but scoff a little.

"The only reason why I almost died today was because I wasn't prepared for something yanking me down into the depths. I'm a capable swimmer on my own, thank you very much."

"You never know. There could be sea monsters out there, looking to drag a beautiful young woman such as yourself into their lairs," Yamano laughed a little, "I would if I was one."

"Seriously, what is it with you and hitting on me?" I rolled my eyes, "I doubt you've been with many girls, seeing that kind of attitude from you."

Yamano remained silent, the tense atmosphere from before returning, and I slightly flinched, "Sorry--"

"You don't know much about me," He sighed and slid off the rock face, slipping silently into the water, "But that doesn't mean I won't stop trying to get to know you. I'll try to swing by tomorrow, and maybe we can just explore the nearby reef."

"Sure, that sounds like a much better idea than a kiss to me," I waved behind me as I walked away from the tide pool, jumping over the now exposed terrain as the tide pulled away from the shore. I tossed the wet bag of trash into a garbage can before making my way back to my cramped apartment, almost half a kilometer away. It wasn't a long walk, and I unlocked the door with the key in my wallet.

Locking the door behind me, I quickly grabbed my mesh swimming bag and threw in my swim goggles, nose plug, and my favorite swim shirt with a matching bikini bottom before laying my long freediving fins on top of the bag. I smiled as I put the gear by the front door, before laying down on the bed and rapidly falling asleep from the exhaustion I didn't know I had.

Yamano sank beneath the calm surface after the young woman left to get something at a 'creamery shop' and brushed his hand over where she had touched his scales, partially surprised that she didn't ask any questions as to why he had a tail. He shuddered at the lingering sensation and took a deep breath to calm down, flexing the pectoral and pelvic fins along the tail to feel out the slow current before swimming swiftly down towards the steep drop where he had found (y/n) drifting unconscious. He peeked over the edge to see a figure swimming in slow circles, almost five meters down.

"Still furious about me stealing it?" Yamano called out clearly, propping his chin up with one arm while the other lay flat on the edge as his tail moved to counteract the undercurrent rolling in.

"It was mine -- fair and square!" The figure called out, their gruff voice cutting through the water like it was air. They swam closer towards Yamano, the purple-colored elongated guppy tail was accentuated by the purple bioluminescent shoulders and chest markings making it easier to see

the male figure in the dark waters, the glow tinting the purple irises' against the black scleras in their eyes.

"Ichimatsu, I don't think you know the meaning of 'fair' while in this...mood of yours," Yamano rolled to the side as the merman tried to reach for his throat, swimming out towards open water while watching the attacking figure with an emotionless stare, "Just because it was in your territory at the perfect time doesn't mean that it was the right time to grab it. You have to wait until your prey is weakened."

"You've dragged many humans to their death, you shitty older brother! What do you care about 'perfect timing'?!" Ichimatsu snarled, swimming after him, "Go back to your territory, Osomatsu! Leave me alone and let me do what I want!"

"Leave you alone?" 'Osomatsu' turned towards the pursuing Ichimatsu, flaring out all of his fins and glaring at his younger brother, "I'm the eldest, and I was born to rule this little family. I'm the one that has to ensure that all of us survive for the next century -- and into the millennia after that! You all have lived this long because of

my

decisions --

my

choices -- that have saved us countless times from those barbaric humans! If you want to ruin that, then fine: become a specimen in a lab somewhere, where humans will experiment on you, prick you over and over, cut you open, and ignore everything you say," Osomatsu lowered his voice from a yell to a softer tone, "Have you forgotten what they did to Karamatsu? Have you forgotten what I had to do to get him back?"

Ichimatsu flinched back at the fierce display and looked away at the mention of Karamatsu's name. Osomatsu could see the vibrant bioluminescence begin to fade, relaxing his fins and swimming closer to try

and put a hand on Ichimatsu's shoulder, but the younger brother recoiled away from his touch.

"Ichi..."

"I don't care what you want to do, Osomatsu, but don't you dare bring up his name to get me to calm down again," Biting down in anger on his last word, Ichimatsu lost all glow in his skin and eyes, letting the markings fade into his pale skin color. The sclera in his eyes faded from black to white, maintaining eye contact with Osomatsu. The older brother sighed and looked from Ichimatsu towards the shore.

"Sure, I won't do it again, and I'll make it up to you by having you take my place tomorrow. The dumb human won't even notice the difference between us," A smirk crept onto Osomatsu's lips, "You can even kill her, if you want."

Chapter 3

My fingers tapped furiously across the keyboard as a foreigner chattered my ear away through the phone handset, the blocky receiver shoved between the right side of my face and shoulder. I could understand English very well, and was employed to help be a translator if a Western tourist group came through the office. With a short and clear 'thank you for hiring us' before hanging up the phone, I stretched my arms above my head after I put the receiver back on its dock, reaching back down to finish filling out the digital paperwork of the diving tour that the woman had scheduled for in two months.

Glancing up at the clock to see the minute hand tick over my scheduled clock out time, I sent the reservation to the main business calendar and logged off the computer, punching out quickly and grabbing my swim gear bag from my tiny locker. The swimming fins were always kept in a neat rack within the employee locker room, and I made sure to grab my own pair before leaving the office and saying farewell to my coworkers and boss.

"Oh, hey (l/n). Are you going for a swim?" A masculine voice called out in the lobby as I walked through. I turned and kept a smile on my face as I locked eyes with Genki Iemon, a man that has been starting to get on my nerves recently. There wasn't anything wrong with what he was doing, but his overly friendly comments and gestures were starting to lean towards the 'I like you but I'm a nice guy, so I won't say it' kind of attitude.

"Ah, yeah, Genki," I respectfully answered with his surname, despite multiple attempts to get me to say his first name, "I was hoping to catch up with the high tide before some of the schools leave the closer reefs."

"That's nice. Have you seen any new species?" Genki followed me out the front door, lowering his sunglasses from his head to his face, completely covering the toxic green color they had.

"Not recently," I was honest, and angled my hand over my eyes to create a temporary shield from the nearly setting sun, "I have noticed that the coral closer to the shoreline has been started to show signs of bleaching, but hopefully that'll go away by the time the tourist season comes around."

"It usually does," There was a pause in his voice as he reached over and propped a hand in front of the railing I was about to cross, forcing me to stop or run into it, "Listen, (l/n). You don't have to keep going down to the beach to swim. Haven't you heard the rumors of sharks coming in close?"

"Yeah, and they always leave when the water warms up too much for them," I looked back up at Genki's sunglasses, "You don't have to be worried about me."

"I know that, and I know you can take care of yourself. I just want to make sure that you're taking precautions to stay safe," The pretense in his voice completely dropped as he moved in front of me, cutting off my exit down the building ramp, "You don't have to go today."

"Maybe, but I

want

to," I dropped my hand that was shading my eyes, "I understand your worry, but until we have reported bites on our local beaches, I'm not going to worry about it."

"Can I come with you? Just in case?" He shifted from one side to the other and I saw my opportunity.

"No, thank you," I wiggled my way past him and held onto my gear tightly, "See you tomorrow at work, Genki."

I maneuvered around the large rock outcroppings near the tide pools, walking between the towering water-beaten walls and making my way towards my usual dive site; a nearly submerged boulder platform that had

been ground down flat by the pounding of the waves and sand, leading to a steep 3-meter drop off. It was an easy entrance with my fins, and no one was really around to take whatever my underwater find was that day. I pinched my nostrils closed with the nose clip and sat down on the edge of the rock, putting my fins on and sliding into the cool water. When the water was up to my shoulders, I put on my goggles and dove completely under, submerging myself with the underwater world.

After a few moments of reorienting myself and mentally marking where my exit was, I moved away from the steep rock embedded into the sandy shore and swam towards the nearby coral reef, slowly moving my legs and keeping an eye on the drop off that I was dragged past. It was still a way below me, but the memories of yesterday were fresh and I surfaced to take in some new air before diving towards the coral. It wasn't as brilliant or vibrant as the Caribbean Reef or even the Great Barrier Reef, but it had life.

I was about to even out from my dive when I felt something brush against the calf of my left leg, dangerously close to where the bruise from the previous night was turning from purple to green. I turned around as quickly as I could, only to see Yamano flinch away from me. I awkwardly smiled at his sudden appearance and pointed up towards the surface, wanting to talk. He barely nodded and I noticed that he had switched the red headpiece for a purple-colored one, and changed the silicone tail from the beautiful lionfish to an elongated purple guppy spear tail. This one looked nice on him, as well, and it just seemed that the guy was built to wear the mermaid tails.

I broke the surface first, and moved away to tread water as Yamano breached second, barely taking in a breath.

"Hey, Yamano. I like the tail change," I tried to talk normally with my nose pinched close. I could swear I heard him scoff a little in response, "I...uh, I wanted to thank you again for saving me."

"'s fine," He muttered back to me, seemingly annoyed by what I said.

"Everything all right? You seem more...you seem distant compared to yesterday," I looked at him closely, noticing the small differences in how he carried himself.

"I said, it's fine," His tone was slightly harsh, but his eyes seemed to soften as I flinched back a little, "I mean...I'll get better as I swim."

He was about to dive back down when I touched his left shoulder, and I saw his face twist into a threatening scowl as Yamano turned towards me. I instantly pulled my hand away from his shoulder, my instincts yelling at me to not cross this man.

"Sorry..." I took in a deep breath and silently sank beneath the waves, heading down towards the reef again. With the water pulsing in my ears, I was left alone with my thoughts and I mentally concentrated on Yamano. The man that saved my life yesterday was either going through a severe mood swing, or how he was acting yesterday was a lie and this is how he really was. I reached the reef and began to slowly make my way alongside it, watching the various small fish dart in and out of their homes to avoid the larger fish and my shadow.

I saw another shadow form alongside me and glanced sideways to see Yamano with a neutral look on his face, as if he was thinking of something. I reached out to give him a slight wave to grab his attention, and pointed down towards a patch of white coral that reached towards the surface, drawing his attention towards the small school of black and white striped damselfish. Angling down further, I lowered myself near where they were swimming and looked up at where Yamano was, trying to lift his obviously sour mood. Some kind of emotion seemed to cross his face, but I couldn't put my finger on what it was.

His lips started creasing into a small smile, and he maneuvered himself with the silicone tail to rest near me, keeping an eye on the fish. We stayed and watched until the damselfish had enough of our presence and fled deeper into the reef where we couldn't go. My lungs convulsed and I pointed upwards, motioning to Yamano for my need to breathe. He didn't seem to be bothered by it and I left, wondering just how long he could hold his breath for.

Breaking the surface and taking in a big gulp of fresh air, I pushed my hair from my face behind my head and waited for Yamano to surface before

going back down. A few moments later, he popped up in front of me, not even taking a breath and looked me in the eye.

"I'm not Yamano," His stern voice made me uneasy, "He's my older brother, and he sent me in his place."

Oh...

"I'm not here to entertain you, or be entertained by you," From underwater, he grabbed my upper left arm tightly, catching me by surprise, "I've seen you here before, and I know how fake you are."

Fake...? What the hell does he mean?

"Fake?!" I nearly shouted at him, "I've known you for a whole eight minutes, maybe ten, and you've been nothing but hostile to me!" I shove his hand off of my arm, moving back towards the shoreline, "If anyone is being fake here, it's you! I knew that you weren't Yamano, but I still thought that maybe a relaxing swim would take your mind off things and put you into a better mood. You didn't have to join me if I really bothered you that much."

'Yamano' clicked his tongue and narrowed his eyes at me, "Then I hope you drown."

My mind blanked as I processed his threat.

"Maybe I should've yesterday..." The feeling of my lungs filling with water sent shudders down my spine, "But Yamano saved me, so I'm not going to let that happen again."

"There's nothing special about him. He's an egotistical bastard that constantly gets in my way throughout my life," Yamano's brother turned away and dove back underwater, his silicone tail slapping my right side hard as he swam away. I coughed as seawater rushed over me, the wake of his dive forceful as it created a wave wall around me. I kept my head above the water and recovered while trying to figure out what to do. If he swam in a heated temper, he'd certainly lose oxygen quickly and wouldn't be able to

surface. But maybe he was used to the water and was more experienced with it.

I...

Choice Poll Closed!

Surprisingly, you guys wanted both options equally!

So, I'm going to get creative, and we'll see what happens next. =)

Chapter 4

I took a small breath and looked under the surface of the water, seeing Yamano's brother swim a lot faster than I've seen him move towards the drop-off edge where I had passed out yesterday. I knew that I had the chance to catch up, but my mind continued to race as I forced myself to calm down and take a shallow breath after a long exhale, slipping under the surface and focusing on the retreating purple fin. As I came within a few feet of him, I saw Yamano's brother briefly turn around and seemingly look up at me before swimming past the edge and into the dark below. My heart thudded in my chest as I remembered the feeling of drowning, but pushed past the fear and reached out towards him, my fingertips barely brushing against the tips of his fin. As if offended by what I did, he whirled towards me much faster than I anticipated, both of his hands gripping my wrists tightly and glaring right into my eyes through my goggles.

"You just won't quit, will you?" I could somehow hear everything he was saying, despite being underwater, "I don't want you around, faker, and I don't need your pathetic pity!"

But I just want to help you...!

I wish I could've spoken like he somehow did. My years of training helped keep my mouth shut and my heart rate slow, but my exterior calmness only seemed to piss of him off even more.

"I should've killed you yesterday," He growled through clenched teeth, "Maybe I'll finish the job today."

His face leered closer to me, and I tried to pull away when I realized his teeth had somehow sharpened into jagged fangs, his mouth closing in on my left shoulder. I tried to reach for my diving knife, but he kept my hands pinned firmly by my sides. I heard the rush of water past my ear before I felt the tight grip on my wrists suddenly release, watching on as the familiar silhouette of Genki Iemon grappled with the man in front of me.

Feeling my lungs convulse as they started to reach their limit, I had no choice but to focus on saving myself. I swam towards the surface and sucked in a lungful of fresh air, immediately turning back down and putting as much power as I could into my legs to try and reach the two men still grappling with each other.

Yamano's brother had both of his hands clasped around Genki's throat, my coworker gritting his teeth tightly as his vivid green gaze was fixated on the 'merman'. I tried to pull Genki away from him, but the grip the man had on Genki's throat was too tight. I mentally apologized to the brother and drew my dagger, shoving it into his forearm. A deafening shriek emanated from the brother, and I took that brief moment to grab Genki and swim as fast as I could towards the surface. A searing pain lanced up my leg as the surface loomed closer, my lungs beginning to burn as the air within them became depleted.

Catching the scream of pain in my throat, I looked down to see Yamano's brother clawing at my left calf, his long nails ripping into the muscle. I let go of Genki to try and break free from Yamano's brother, but his nearly-frantic movements were dragging me further underwater.

Goddamn it...not again...!

I tried to kick at the man with my right heel, but the movement was clumsy underwater and he was able to shove my leg aside without it hitting anything.

"Ichimatsu, stop!"

I heard the voice come from above me, barely recognizing it. The man's head looked from me towards the speaker, and his expression nearly went slack as his nails released their painful hold. With the sudden change in demeanor from Yamano's brother, I guessed that his name was 'Ichimatsu', but the revelation didn't last long as I realized that this was my chance. I kicked away from him and up towards the surface, my lungs burning as the oxygen they had was nearly spent. After taking a few deep breaths in after breaking the surface, I turned around and realized that Genki hadn't surfaced yet.

Looking back under the waves, I saw a relieved-looking Genki reach up towards the surface a meter under me with no 'Ichimatsu' in sight. I grabbed his hand and pulled him up, swimming us both over towards the rocky crevice that I used as an entrance, my left leg crying out in agony as I forced it to move in tandem with my right leg.

"What the hell...just happened...?" I panted as I lightly pulled Genki towards the rock, helping him get up first. I tried to get up on my own, but my left leg was throbbing horribly and hurt like hell.

"I'll help you up," Genki motioned for me to turn around, slipping his hands underneath my arms as he effortlessly dragged me out of the water. The pain in my calf started to subside when I realized the position that Genki had put me in -- nestled between his legs with my back resting against his chest. His arms were draped across my shoulders and I felt his forehead press against the back of my own head. Without panic or adrenaline flooding my senses anymore, I could feel that he was still wearing the office attire from earlier, the damp cloth trying to cling to my back.

"Wh--what are you doing, Genki?!" My face flushed and I tried to get out of his grip until he spoke, the tremor of his voice causing me to stop and listen.

"Just relax, (l/n), please...you almost died again because of me..."

"What do you--?" I couldn't understand why he was saying that.

"I'm willing to explain, but I just need you to watch for now," He released his hold on me and unsheathed my diving knife as he maneuvered to kneel by my left leg, pressing the blade to his palm and making a small slice on his skin. Before I could object to what he did, he pressed the cut against the jagged wounds on my left calf.

"What the hell are you doing--?!" I angrily asked before my throat tightened in extreme pain, the intensity almost tenfold than that of the wound itself. I tried to hold back from screaming, my body writhing in agony before the feeling passed quickly when Genki removed his hand from my calf.

Scooping up some ocean water, he splashed the wound with it but I didn't feel any kind of adverse reaction from the saltiness.

In fact, I didn't see any kind of cut or scar when the blood was fully washed away.

Genki washed off the blood from his hand before moving towards a large duffel bag and grabbing a towel that was laying on top, ruffling his damp hair with it and sitting on a small rock outcropping from one of the surrounding boulders.

"What did you do--? No, stop. You don't get to walk off like you're Mr. I-Just-Saved-Your-Life, Genki," I turned to face him while pulling off my diving fins, "What the hell was that, and why did you follow me?" I motioned to the water before pointing an accusatory finger at him.

"That's where you want me to start?" He sighed and draped his towel over his head, casting his face in shadow, "First, let me apologize for my little brother hurting you, and don't worry about getting any kind of diseases from me. My blood is...special."

Little brother...? Special blood?

"He can be socially awkward at times and prickly at others, but I'm sure that he didn't mean whatever he said to you," Genki continued, looking over at me and giving an apologetic smile, "Ichimatsu doesn't really truly mean for what happened, especially at his hands."

"Wait...hold up," I stood up slowly, testing my left calf but feeling no pain, "What are you talking about?" I dumped my diving fins on my bag and moved over to Genki, folding my arms and standing a few feet in front of him. I could care less about getting dry right now -- I needed answers.

Genki looked up at me before turning his face away, "Maybe I'm talking too fast."

"Huh, I'd say that's right. What did you mean 'special blood'?" I huffed a little.

"I wanted you to see what it could do before I tried to explain it to you. Some scientists found out that my blood is unique, and can heal even the most grievous of wounds," He looked at my left calf, "I know what it can do, and I didn't want to rush you to the hospital with an injury like that...I don't want your favorite diving spot to be closed down."

The conversation with him earlier rang through my brain, and I lowered my head as I tried to piece together what he was talking about. It obviously wasn't a universal blood type he's talking about, and the previous pain was very real...

"Okay...but what about Yamano's brother wanting to kill me?"

"Ah, then he didn't tell you his name. It's Ichimatsu, one of my younger brothers," Genki sighed and rubbed the towel against his head a little more, "We are...I mean, we were sextuplets. Ichimatsu tends to show brotherly love in the most violent ways."

"'Were'?" I heard the sorrow in his voice.

"Yeah...I made some careless mistakes, and I paid for them in full," Genki tugged off the damp button-up shirt and revealed a muscular torso that was completely riddled with scars. Some looked like shark bites while others had the tell-tale signs of surgical wounds. He didn't seem bothered by the reveal but I quickly looked away, finding myself at a loss for words to try and apologize for whatever he went through.

A heavy silence filled the air between us before I shifted uncomfortably.

"You don't have to tell me, Genki. If it's a family matter, then maybe it's best if I don't get involved," I muttered before moving towards my bag, attempting to gather up my things that were scattered by the rising tide. I inwardly groaned as I picked up my soaked towel, realizing that I'd have to walk back to my apartment wet. At least the shower would be nice.

"(L/n), whether you know it or not, it's completely my fault that you're involved now," I heard Genki move from the rock he was sitting on, "When I was hired on by the company five months ago, I became excited because

you were the only one that was willing enough to help me learn the ropes. You were smart, cheerful, and fun to work with, so I ended up telling my brothers about you. I guess they started watching for you on this coastline, and Ichimatsu just happened to get to you first."

My eyes drifted down towards my left ankle, where the bruising from yesterday was at its ugliest.

Genki must've caught my movement, as he responded quickly, "Yeah...that was him. He sometimes gets this attitude where I can't have anything better than him, but I didn't think he'd take it that far again after Osomatsu intervened yesterday."

Osomatsu...? I've never met anyone with that name...

I raised an eyebrow as I turned back towards Genki, catching him as he pulled a dry tank top undershirt over his head.

"He went by 'Yamano' when he introduced himself," Genki caught my confused look, "It's an ancient family name. He's...not a terrible guy, just really misguided."

"I wouldn't call him 'misguided'. After all, he tried to get me to have sex with him after saving me..." I stopped myself mid-sentence, "Though, I wonder if that was all staged now. And if the previous two brothers used fake names, then what's your real name?" I turned towards him, noticing the pattern that his brothers had used. I suspected that 'Genki Iemon' wasn't this man's name, either.

Genki laughed nervously as he wrung out the soaked office shirt, "Well, it is Genki Iemon legally...but my old name was Matsuno Karamatsu."

I lowered my raised eyebrow, "Okay, and does this 'special blood' of yours make you anything different than a human?"

He turned away from me for a moment before looking me in the eye, "I was never human to begin with. I'm a merman."

Chapter 5

I couldn't tear my eyes away from Genki Iemon, from Matsuno Karamatsu, the man who claimed to be a merman. If it wasn't for the healed wound on my calf, I would've never believed him. The grown man that stood in front of me seemed to be out of his mind with the ridiculous claims he made -- but at the same time, I couldn't refute him at all.

I could only stare as he went back to tending to the wet shirt in his hands, putting it away in a plastic bag before tucking it into an outer pocket of the duffle bag. The tank top didn't do much to hide the scars on his arms and neck, and I thought back to the look on 'Yamano's' face when I attempted to touch his fin, back to the empty glare his eyes gave me when he forced my hand away.

I put my hands to my face in growing horror.

If he was an actual lionfish merman, then I could've died if I touched the fin...!

"(L/n), are you all right...?" I felt Genki's hand on my right shoulder, a gentle touch without meaning other than concern.

"Ah...yeah...it's just a lot to take in," I nodded my head as I picked up my mesh bag from the flooded area, grabbing my fins and walking towards the main beach. I heard him gather his things and walk behind me, not saying anything more and seemingly waiting for me to collect my thoughts.

"I can escort you home, if you'd like," Genki offered, "Though, if you want to be left alone, I'd understand."

"I...just need some time to be by myself, Genki," I turned back to look at him, my mind lightheaded and full of thoughts at the same time, "Thank you for the offer, though."

"All right. Should I tell the boss about anything when I get into work tomorrow?"

Ah, that's right. He goes to work earlier than I do.

"No, thanks. If I need to tell him anything, I'll call before my shift," I started to make my way towards the street before I felt Genki's hand encompass my own. I turned around quickly to see him release my hand, feeling a note pushed between my index and middle fingers.

"It's my phone number. If you have any questions, or have anything I can help out with, don't be shy," Genki gave his usual smile before waving farewell as he walked towards the bus stop nearby. I could only nod as he left, turning back towards the direction of my apartment and mulling over everything that happened.

I didn't realize that I made it home until I heard the lock engage on the apartment door behind me. Tossing the wet bag into the sink near the washing machine, I wiped off my feet with the damp shirt still on me and tossed it into the same sink afterwards. I began to fill the tub with barely hot water, stripping down completely and throwing the swimsuit on top of everything else in the sink. Scrubbing completely down and thoroughly washing my salted hair, I lowered myself into the filled tub and tried to relax. The fresh water felt nice but my thoughts kept straying towards the image of Genki rubbing his

blood

on my left calf, bringing me to look at the area up close.

There were no marks from where Ichimatsu had clawed at my skin, and it was left smooth. A flash of Genki's scars briefly appeared in my mind before I shook my head, trying to clear my thoughts.

If his blood could heal something like that, then why is his skin not flawless?

Choking on the water that I had somehow sunk into, I clambered out of the tub and looked in disbelief as the clock in the laundry room showed 10:14pm.

I had spent two hours in the tub.

Pulling the drain plug, I dried myself off with a fresh towel and put on some night clothes before sorting out the bag in the sink. I rinsed off the clothes and towel, putting them in the washer and leaving the bathing suit to dry on a hanger. Debating on making some warmed milk or just going straight to bed, I figured that the milk would help me sleep and went to mix some up, drinking it slowly as I made my way towards my bed.

My morning alarm greeted my ears all too soon, and I stretched before turning it off as I sat up. Going through my morning routine was easy enough, but when I walked through the office doors, I saw Genki walking from his cubicle towards the little coffee area, catching my eye and giving a small wave. I gave him a slight nod before focusing on my tasks for the day: a boat tour in a few hours, followed by the standard chore of answering calls for the remainder of the day. Thankfully the boat tour didn't include a dive, so I didn't need to prepare anything other than make sure we had the right amount of handouts needed for the tourists.

The day seemed to fly by as the hours picked up steam and soon the clock showed that I was scheduled to leave the office. Leaning back in my chair, I gave a silent sigh and rubbed my temples in semi-frustration. The boat tour had turned out to be smaller than we were originally told but there was no drama from the tourists, nor any unwelcome visitors from beneath the waves. As I stood up to leave, I saw Genki clock out and grab the same duffle bag from yesterday.

"Hey Genki, are you heading somewhere?" I mentally palmed my face for the dumb question. If he wasn't going somewhere, he wouldn't have the bag. Genki looked back towards me and had a small look of surprise on his face, his green eyes turned from a dull pear color to a vibrant lime.

"Ah...yeah I am, (l/n). Heading out to see some family and friends for the rest of the day," He rolled his right shoulder to adjust the bag's weight, "I'll see you tomorrow at work."

A strange feeling grew in the pit of my stomach as Genki began to walk away, almost like I knew that if I didn't stop him, I'd never see him again. I barely knew the man but the events from yesterday replayed over and over in my head, and I couldn't shake the feeling of wanting to know more about him.

"Wait..." I quickly walked down the ramp and tried to stop him, "What are you planning to do, Genki?"

The man didn't stop walking and I simply watched as he motioned for me to follow. Clenching my fists, I obliged as he made his way towards the bus stop from the previous night, and we didn't have to wait long for the bus to arrive. Genki paid for my ticket and sat towards the back, motioning once more for me to sit next to him. When I was comfortably sitting down, he looked down towards me and gave a small smile.

"When you didn't text me anything after what happened, I was worried that I had crossed a line with you. So, I wanted work to be normal for you, but I didn't expect you to approach me first," His voice was soft, and a little chuckle left his lips after he finished.

"I..." I needed to be honest, "I had a feeling that you'd go away if I let you leave by yourself."

"(L/n), you aren't falling for me, are you?" The lightness in his voice could have meant that he was joking.

"I don't think so, but..." I answered shakily with a nervous smile, "Maybe what happened yesterday is clouding my mind, so I can't help but be fascinated with the story you shared. I want to know more, but I don't know if I should ask. I thought you were a nice guy at work, but when you showed sincere concern for me...I didn't really know what to think anymore." The words spilled out of my mouth before I could stop them, and I looked away from Genki, embarrassment flooding my face.

There were a few moments of silence as the bus drove through different intersections of the town before leaving the town towards the southern side of the island.

"I understand, (l/n). I'd be confused if I were in your shoes, and I get that you're curious.

Most

of the human race is," The comment was filled with a layer of anger but his voice suddenly softened after, "but I had a feeling that you'd be more understanding of what I am. I'm happy to see that it hasn't chased you away."

I turned my head to look back at him, and saw a smile on his lips. I tried to give a smile back, but my lips faltered as thoughts jumbled in my head.

"I promise that I'm not going to just disappear, not when I have a job that I really enjoy," I could see him move to look out the window in the corner of my eye, "I'm sorry that I have caused you concern. I'm just going to visit an old family friend at her home."

"That's the second or third time you've mentioned how old your family is. How old are you anyway?" I couldn't hold back the question and silently clenched my jaw, angry at the lack of self-control I've had recently.

"Physically, I'm in my twenties, but I've actually lived a lot longer than that," I could hear the sadness in his voice, "I've actually lost count as to how many years have passed."

"Well, what's the first major thing you remember happening in your life?" I looked at him again to see him propping his chin up with his hand, the elbow laying flat on the window sill. His green eyes flicked over to me before moving towards the outside world again.

"I remember bantering back and forth with Himiko, keeping her company as she sailed across the channel to China," He hummed thoughtfully, "She would comment on how women were more powerful than men in her

country, but she still loved her brother greatly for all of the work that he would do for her in her name."

"Himiko...you mean the Shamaness-Queen that lived until the mid-200s CE?" My brain took a moment to process the information.

"Is that the title she has now?" A slight smile danced on Genki's lips before his eyes darted back to me.

"You're an awful liar. There's no way you're over two-thousand years old!" I tried to laugh, but the sincerity in his eyes made me falter, "...right?"

"I guess I am. I don't usually keep a calendar on me, so the years tend to fly by without me knowing," He looked out of the window again before moving to request the bus to stop, "We're here."

I hurried to follow him off of the bus, and stepped out onto a lonely drive with barely any street lights to illuminate it at night. There was a single house along this strip of road, with the chimney smoke announcing that someone was home.

"What is this place?"

"It's the home of Yowai Totoko, an old friend of my family. I try to visit her as often as I can these days, and she allows me to rest here when I need it," Genki shrugged his bag onto his shoulder before walking towards the house. I heard the ocean crashing against the shoreline that must be right next to the house, and wondered how it was still standing with the fluctuating tides and flooding seasons Japan has.

"Is she like you?" I followed him, now tethered to the man in an unfamiliar place.

"No, she's like you."

Chapter 6

Genki knocked lightly on the door before a kind voice called out for him to enter, and he pulled open the sliding door before inviting me in first.

"Totoko, I have a visitor with me!" He cheerfully called out as I stepped through the threshold of the doorway. I took off my shoes and lay them neatly in the corner of the entrance, hearing the shuffling of feet coming from down the hallway on the right.

An elderly lady poked her head out from the room doorway and gave me a studious look, as if she was analyzing my very soul. Her hair was pinned up in a loose bun near the crown of her head, with some stray strands trailing down behind her ears. She wore a deep blue yukata that seemed to resemble a flowing river with various shades of koi jumping out of it, but the exterior beauty faded as a scowl settled onto her face, her eyes narrowed at me.

"You brought an uggo here?" The elderly woman huffed before ducking back into the room. I blinked a few times to try and process the question as Genki stuttered and tried to catch up to the woman, apologizing to me as he passed by.

"Totoko, it's not like that! She's just a coworker and she's had a few stressful days--" I couldn't hear what he said next as his voice trailed off deeper into the house. Their voices echoed through the hall, but I couldn't make out any words.

I took a deep breath and smelled the familiar scent of sea salt in the air, following it until I approached an open set of sliding doors that separated the exterior porch from whatever room I was in, possibly the sitting room. There was a stairway that led from the porch to the waterfront a few feet below, the white sand turning orange with the light from the sunset. Sitting on the shoreline was a humanoid figure, facing the open water and unmoving, but I guessed from the way the hair was cut that it was another brother of Genki's.

He did say that they were sextuplets, so there are six in total...

I gently took off my socks before stepping down the stairway, studying the unknown brother before he could notice me.

This one also had fins where the ears would be, but there wasn't any spiny coral like Ichimatsu's or Osomatu's headpiece. Instead, there were smaller brain corals acting as hairpins that kept his hair out of his face. The skin that met the tail scales was raised, as if it was agitated by the water and sand rubbing against it, and the fin layout was not as extravagant as Osomatsu's lionfish tail. Two pectoral fins lay limply in the water, but I couldn't see what other fins he had due to his sitting position, with his 'knees' close to his chest as he kept looking out towards the horizon. The sunset threw off what color his scales were, but they seemed to have a deep green hue.

"Uh...hello there," I coughed softly so as not to surprise him. It didn't seem to work as he spun around his head instantly, looking as if to dive towards the deeper water, "Wa...wait! I came here with Gen...Matsuno Karamatsu."

"Karamatsu's here?" His voice seemed a little bit higher than Genki's, but his body language noticeably relaxed when I mentioned Genki's old name.

I guess he wasn't lying about who he is.

"Yeah...he's up with Mrs. Yowai still, but she didn't seem to like me being here," I made my way towards the water's edge, letting the waves tickle my toes but leaving enough space between this brother to feel like I wasn't going to attack him -- or give him a chance to attack me. I had no idea how the other brothers were like, but having one mad at me was more than enough.

"Sounds like Totoko," He laughed a little before looking back out to the horizon, "You must be (l/n) (y/n) if you came with Karamatsu. Is he still his painful self around the office?"

Painful?

"No, he's fine. He seems to work hard, and says that he loves the job," I recalled the conversation on the bus and fought down the flush I felt on my face.

"Really? I guess he's learned to mellow out over the years," The brother gazed back towards me, "My name is Choromatsu. Sorry about the late introduction...has he...uh...t-told you already?" The longer he tried to look at me, the more nervous he seemed to get.

"About the merman thing? Yeah..."

"Oh, good. I don't know what he told you, but let's just say that not everyone actually believes what we really are," He seemed to be a little relieved, "Oh, and to avoid confusion, you can call me by my first name."

"So...Choromatsu."

"Y-yes?" His voice jumped up an octave and his stutter came back twofold.

"Are you okay?" I was worried that he was bitten by something, but it could also be that they may have never really talked to a younger person than Yowai.

"Yeah...just ner--trying to relax, is all," He moved a little bit closer and leaned in as if inspecting something on my legs, "Oh...sorry about that."

I looked down to see the bruise around my left ankle, "How did you know?"

"It's...one of Ichimatsu's...preferences," He seemed to know more, but I let it be for now.

"It's not a huge deal. I mean, I'm still alive, so it's okay...kinda," I tried to smile, but the emotion didn't quite feel right, "You seem okay to be around, Choromatsu. You haven't tried to drag me out into the water, so far."

"(L/n)!" Genki's shout came from within the house, and I heard footsteps before I saw him appear on the porch.

"Genki, I'm here with Choromatsu," I waved to him before motioning towards Choromatsu. I could see a look of slight relief pass over Genki's face before he made his way towards the private beach, kneeling next to Choromatsu in the water. I noticed that he had changed from his work attire to a t-shirt and beach shorts.

"Choro, I'm happy to see you, my brother!" He reached out for a hug that seemed to be unwanted from Choromatsu.

"Yeah, yeah...good to see you, too, Karamatsu," Choromatsu smiled a little, but didn't reciprocate the hug fully. I took a few steps back towards the staircase and brushed off the sand from my feet, leaving the two men to be alone after what was implied was a long time.

"Choromatsu, how has everything been since that trawler went down in the deeper waters of Japan?" Karamatsu ran his left hand through his tousled hair as he sat next to his younger brother.

"That happened a while ago -- almost twenty years, actually," Choromatsu scoffed, "You really haven't been able to pay attention, have you?"

"No, not really," Karamatsu partially turned towards the house to see (y/n) walk inside and close the porch sliding door behind her, "I've been busy trying to secure a life for me here."

"You know...if you asked Osomatsu, he could probably give you back your fins. He's gotten stupid powerful lately, but his tantrums have seemed to grow worse along with his abilities. I'm doing all I can, even if it is just keeping Totoko from experiencing his wrath," Choromatsu relaxed his tail and fully lay out in the sand, letting the water surround him with each wave.

"What happened to Todomatsu? I thought that this was his job," Karamatsu raised an eyebrow.

"...He went rogue a few years ago, just after Jyushimatsu."

"Then Ichimatsu...?"

"He's probably the next to fall past the point of no return. With how angry he becomes, it wouldn't surprise me if he turns full rogue in the next year or so," A wave completely covered Choromatsu's face, but his voice still carried as if he had only paused for breath, "I heard that there was a scuffle between you two just north of here, and (l/n) was involved."

"It wasn't really like that. I just had a feeling that he'd be hunting around that area, and it turned out to be right...like always," Karamatsu stood up fully before a second wave crashed into the shore, "We've always had this sixth sense when another brother is around."

Choromatsu fell quiet as the wave receded from the shore, just listening to the sounds the water made as it hit against many of the nearby rocks.

"Just don't get caught again."

Chapter 7

I watched in silence as Mrs. Yowai busied herself with making tea and arranging small snacks onto a platter, while Genki was still outside with one of his brothers, Choromatsu. The only sounds besides Mrs. Yowai shuffling around were the waves from down below.

"Are you sure I can't help you with any--"

"I'm fine. You just sit there and look pretty for Karamatsu," Her answer cut off my question, the tone still heavy with something similar to contempt.

"We're not in a relationship," I tried to explain, "Genki and I only work together, nothing more."

"So, you think that he brings all of his coworkers here?"

"I don't know. I don't really involve myself with anyone at work," I gave a small huff, propping my head on my hand as I leaned towards the table.

"Yet here you are, involved with the idiot brothers just like the fellow moron you are," She shoved a cup of hot tea near my elbow resting on the sitting table, "Choromatsu told me what had happened yesterday between you and the other two. You should've run when Karamatsu tried to warn you."

Her words sent a jolt of recognition down my spine, a memory of Genki's slightly worried face looking down at mine as he tried to delay me going to the beach.

"I may be a moron, but you can't blame me for going anyway," I reached for the tea and shifted to look out the open windows facing the ocean, "I love the ocean."

"What's that?"

"Hmm?"

"That vial. What's in it?" Mrs. Yowai's tone wasn't curious. It sounded accusatory.

"I've had it for my most of my life. I found it in a shop and always wore it since...why?" I wrap my hand around the glass vial hanging around my neck, turning back towards her.

"I'd suggest you get rid of it as soon as you can. Throw it back into the ocean where it came from. It will bring you nothing but trouble," She turned back to her kitchen, waving her hand dismissively as she moved, "Though, I'm sure that getting rid of it now will do you no good."

"What is it? I thought it was just a regular stone in ocean water."

"It's not a stone -- it's a chunk of well-rounded red coral," She called out from the kitchen, "I've only seen it twice in my lifetime, and it's brought me no joy."

"It smells good in here, Totoko. What are you making?" Genki closed the sliding door and moved towards the table, kneeling somewhat across from me.

"Green tea and some biscuits for tomorrow morning," She walked back into the room with a cup for Genki, "(L/n), I don't have a room prepared for you, so you'll have to go back home."

"That's fine. I didn't bring a change of clothes," I gave a small nod before looking towards Genki, "I guess I'll see you tomorrow at work, then."

"Let me walk you to the bus stop, at least," He stood up with me before escorting me to the front door, excusing himself for a moment to Mrs. Yowai. I put my socks back on before stepping into my work shoes, taking in a small breath to organize my thoughts.

The walk to the bus stop was quiet between Genki and myself. I had questions tumbling around in my head and I didn't feel like I would be able

to ask them without sounding rude to him or his family. The sun was well below the horizon, the last rays of day barely lighting up the clouds that hung in the sky. I was about to open my mouth to speak when Genki raised his voice.

"I'm sorry about everything that's happened so far."

"No, I--"

"(Y/n), I need you to just listen to me," The sternness in his voice shut me up. I had never heard him say my first name, or even speak in that tone, before, "I wish I could go back and keep you from all of this ever happening. Then again, this all happened because I made stupid decisions that got me into more trouble that it was worth. So, I'm taking the blame for everything. You're an innocent bystander that's been dragged into this, and here I am not giving you the tools and info to keep yourself safe."

I stayed silent.

"My family is dangerous, and shouldn't be considered 'safe' to be around at any point. What you did today with Choromatsu was reckless, especially after yesterday...are you even thinking about your actions?" His voice cracked, and I looked up at him in shock, only to see his green eyes look directly back at me. They held an intense glare before I had to break eye contact, "I know this is out of the blue, but if you get further involved with any of my brothers...I don't think I'll be able to keep you safe."

"Then tell me what kind of danger they are to me, instead of insinuating that I messed up because I minded my own business two days ago," I cut him off and stopped walking, clenching my fists, "I'm an adult and can handle myself, so stop belittling me because I suddenly have the attention of a few mythological creatures."

Genki took a few steps before turning towards me, his eyes meeting mine once again, "Osomatsu sees you as a toy to play with -- he sees you as something to ease his boredom. Choromatsu doesn't care about you as his duty prevents him from leaving this area. Ichimatsu was only interested in you as a way to hurt me."

I waited for him to continue before I spoke, "And the other two?"

"There has been no communication with them. They...lost themselves some time ago, and shouldn't be approached if you see them at all," The hurt in his voice caused a pang in my heart. The thought of losing family to something beyond one's control must be the worst feeling in the world.

"What if I stayed away from the beach for a few weeks...?" I quietly asked, "Would that help ease tensions between you all?"

"It could help, or it may make it worse."

"Well, I'll put in a request at work to be unavailable for the boat tours, and I'll just go swim laps at the pool nearby if I want to be in the water," I started walking again as I saw the bus round the corner, wanting to catch it so I could go home.

"Okay, (L/n)," Genki went back to using my last name, "I'll figure out what we can do in the meantime."

I gave him a wave before boarding the stopped bus, seeing him wave back as he remained standing where I left him, the bus driving away. I paid my fare and picked a seat near the back, thinking back on everything that had happened in the last three days, wondering how anyone else would've handled this kind of situation.

As the bus moved along the street heading towards a hilly section, I noticed the road was near the edge of a cliff for a brief stretch. I looked down towards the dark waters and a small glint of yellow caught my eye before I looked back towards the area again, the yellow glint now gone. In its place was a wave that was too close for comfort, before I recognized that it had enough height to hit the bus. I gripped the stabilizing pole next to my seat as the wave hit the bus full force, barely staying in my seat as I was thrown to the left before the bus drifted towards the right, the water rebounding towards the ocean. I felt a large shift as the right tires slipped off the edge of the cliff, the four passengers screaming in panic as the bus driver frantically tried turning the bus towards the road again.

The metal underneath me groaned as it shifted again towards the ocean, slipping from its teetering position into a freefall, rolling over and over on its side. Losing my grip, I was thrown from my seat after the first roll, instantly covering my head with my arms and not wanting to lose consciousness at this point. My heart raced in panic and I saw the ocean come closer and closer with each roll. Instinctively, I took a breath and somehow managed to hold it as the bus slammed into the water, the frame almost collapsing under its momentum as the glass windows shattered. Water began flooding the cabin quickly, and the driver tried to open the front and back doors to let people escape. Letting out my held breath before taking another one, I grabbed the nearest person and swam down towards the door I was closest to, my scuba training helping keep my mind clear as I forced the other person through first.

I helped him swim to the surface -- which was only a few feet above us -- and yelled out to move away from the rocks near the cliff. I made a quick headcount and realized we were all out as the bus gave a huge sigh and slipped under the large waves. The cloudy night sky made it hard to see anything along the shoreline, but people were making their way towards what seemed like a private beach, nestled along the cliff as the hill dipped down towards the nearby town. I began to swim in that direction, taking a breath every few freestyle strokes, trying to regain my composure from the potentially horrible accident that just happened.

As my right arm was about to pull up for another rotation, I felt something cold grip the wrist and I took in a quick breath before I was pulled under. I could feel the movement of the water and realized that it was similar to swimming alongside Ichimatsu, but I saw bioluminescent yellow patterns along the arm leading to the shoulders, the glow continuing on the other side and revealing a humanoid upper body as the elongated tail pushed the creature through the water. The pressure underwater began to grow in my ears and I tried to wrench my wrist away from whoever was holding it. I paused in shock as I saw the bioluminescence reach the merman's eyes, the sharp yellow irises looking back at me.

I tried to motion towards the surface, but the smile on his face only grew. I looked upwards and couldn't see the surface of the water, the clouds

blocking any kind of light.

I didn't know how far down I was.

Damn it...

Choice Poll Closed!!

Yet another tie!

We'll see what happens this time.

Chapter 8

Enough was enough.

I pulled myself closer towards the hand clenching my right wrist and bit down hard on the flesh, tasting iron that mixed with the salt water. There was a scream of pain as the merman yanked his hand away, leaving me behind as he clenched his hand and thrashed around in front of me. I couldn't ask for another opportunity and started swimming up towards the surface, sacrificing a little bit of air to tell me which direction it was.

The office clothing was not suited for a life-or-death situation, fighting against me as the pants began to feel heavy with the oceanic salt water. I kicked off my shoes for more control, thinking that losing the ¥3000 pair of shoes would be better than losing my life. With no light from above the surface, I had no judge of depth outside of the water pressure in my ears. It was starting to lessen more and more, which told me that I was definitely ascending.

My hands broke through the surface before I realized it, my body breaching and I instinctively took in another fresh breath. I knew that I wasn't safe yet -- not even by a long shot -- but I wasn't expecting to feel a sharp pain in my left side. The pain grew as I was pulled back under the waves, unable to scream for help. I moved my hands to my side and felt a hairy object clamped down on it, and I tried looking towards the thing when I realized that there were two yellow eyes looking right back at me. I would've gasped if I wasn't underwater, and started hitting the head of the creature, trying to shove it off and break free from its grip.

The merman smiled as he pulled away from my side, my blood drifting away into the water and heavily staining his lips and teeth. I winced as the salt water filled the puncture holes that his teeth left, feeling the throbbing become more and more prominent as I tried to move away from the merman. I broke the surface once more and took in more air to try and scream for help from the survivors of the crash that had made it to the

shoreline, but was cut short as more pain shot up my left leg and I was pulled back under the waves once again.

I felt his fingers and nails dig into my calf and hamstrings, cutting through the fabric of my pants easily. Trying to pry off his hands felt similar to opening a locked steel door without a crowbar. Panic began to bubble up in my throat, seeing the merman constantly watching my reactions as the smile on his lips remained. He let my leg go and remained close by to see what my next actions would be. Then it clicked.

He was playing with me.

Anger replaced panic and frustration rose as I didn't have any kind of weapon on my person or around me. I was in open water; nearly one-hundred fifty-two meters from the shoreline, with a seemingly endless abyss beneath me and a sheer cliff-face that collided with the sea about twenty meters away. I was very much alone in this 'fight'.

The realization was interrupted as the yellow marked merman clamped his sharp teeth down on my right forearm, the jagged tips nearly scraping against the bone. My body seemed to work on its own as my mouth opened underwater and screamed, the muffled sound reverberating in my ears as the air escaped my lungs. Each wound that he opened up was almost a death sentence in ocean water, and I couldn't take it anymore. Practically dragging him up with me, I weakly swam for the surface to try and scream for help.

Breaking the surface, I took in a breath and my intended scream came out as a whimper. I tried again only to find water rushing into my mouth as a harsh tug on my forearm reminded me that the merman was still attached. My mind ran wild with ideas that my sub-consciousness kept shooting down.

Everything became still as a soft red glow began to emanate from my chest, pulsing softly like a heart. The merman jerked back as if it was hurting him, his 'friendly' smile turning into a scowl as his wide eyes narrowed, glaring from the glow to me. I reached for whatever was glowing with my right hand, only to grasp the small vial hanging around my neck and shoving it towards him in hopes that it'd chase him away. He didn't wince back any

further, but I was able to see more of him as the red glow became brighter with each pulse.

Messy dark hair was tossed around with the current, held back in some places with yellow coral chunks. His pupils were glowing a bright yellowish-orange on a black sclera background, his eyes darting back and forth between the vial and myself. The bioluminescent markings didn't seem to be arranged in any sort of significant manner, but the patterns stopped short of his abdominal region and where his tail began. Unlike the other brothers, this one was definitely born with a shark tail, more akin to a nurse shark than the more notorious sharks.

The glow from the red coral in the vial began to hurt my eyes, but I kept watching the yellow merman. He tried to reach out and grab the vial, but I somehow managed to keep it out of his reach on the first try. However, he wrapped his whole body around my own and grabbed my right hand with both of his taloned hands.

"Not fair...not fair...!" He whined as his nails raked against my fingers, trying to pry them off of the vial. His body tightened against mine and immobilized my legs, both of us starting to sink deeper into the abyss. The rough scales of his tail felt like sandpaper against my wounded side and leg, and I was certain that the amount of blood in the water would draw unwanted marine attention.

"What's not fair, Jyushimatsu, is that you're roughing up my claim."

I felt the merman wrapped around me get ripped off like a wet sack, the water rushing around me as I was freed from the constriction. I took my chance and swam back up to the surface, tempted to look back. When I had my head above water, I took a few deep breaths before curiosity took hold, having me look underneath the waves to see what was happening. I heard inhuman grunts and screeches as I recognized the flared fins of a lionfish tangled up with the shark merman.

Osomatsu.

The yellow glow partially outlined the two mermen fighting each other with fists, teeth, and talons. There was no feasible way that I'd be able to help, or even participate, in this fight, so I focused my energy on moving towards the shoreline where I saw flashing red lights from emergency vehicles. My left leg and side protested from the movement, but I pushed through and slowly made progress before I felt two hands gently take a hold of my waist, practically lifting me out of the water.

"Hey, don't move too much, Ms. Professional Diver," Osomatsu's chiding voice seemed to whisper next to me.

"Don't you even start, Yamano," I cut him off before he could say anything else, "Or should I call you by your real name...Osomatsu?"

He paused with a partially stunned look on his face before a confident smirk crossed his lips, his eyes narrowing down to look at me, "Well, well, well. Seems like you've done some homework, (y/n)," His hands moved to cradle my body in his arms, each arm either supporting my shoulders or hooking underneath my knees, "I should've given you much more credit than I originally had. You're a pretty smart woman, and it was rude of me to not introduce myself properly."

"Or try to convince me that Ichimatsu was you in a different color?" I glared back at him, meeting his gaze and trying not to back down.

"That, too. As an apology, let me bring you home and help clean out those wounds," His smirk dropped into a broad smile, "I may not be as skilled as my brother, but I can still do some healing."

He sounded genuine, but I couldn't read his face anymore as the glow from the vial faded. I bit my bottom lip, trying to figure out if he was actually sincere about the offer.

"Bring me to MY home, or as close as you can," I clarified before I heard a soft chuckle ripple through Osomatsu's chest.

"On my word, I'll bring you as close as I can to your apartment, and help you," He verbally agreed, and I felt him shift his grip ever so slightly before

he started moving along the shoreline, the flashing red lights slowly moving across my vision before being obscured by the foliage.

Chapter 9

Karamatsu sat on the rocky barrier that separated Totoko's property from the rest of the government beach property, watching the calm waters lick the shoreline as Choromatsu hummed gently on the beach. He tilted his face towards the waning moon that began to make its path through the night sky, unsure of what to make of the uneasy feeling in his gut. He had seen (l/n) off safely to the bus, but the feeling hadn't diminished ever since he saw the red tail lights vanish from his sight.

"You're bothered by something," Choromatsu looked towards his older brother sitting on the rocks.

"Yeah, but I don't know what it is," Karamatsu lightly sighed before burying his head in his arms, "There hasn't been any kind of sighting or communication I should be worried about, right?"

"Not that I know of, but I'm left out of the loop a lot," The green merman cast a sidelong glance at the merman in human form, "I know it's been a while, but am I able to ask you a few questions?"

"You can, but whether I answer them or not is up to me," Karamatsu turned to face the merman, positioning himself on the rocks so he'd be more comfortable.

"Fair enough."

"Oww! Dammit, that

hurts

!" I tried to pull my right arm away from the red merman that was currently licking the gouged bite marks deep in my forearm. He had said that his

saliva contained some healing properties, but he never promised it wouldn't be painful.

"'Pain is weakness leaving the body', right?" Osomatsu smirked while keeping my forearm tight in his grip, forcing me to stay still on the end of a small wooden dock that was abandoned, "I told you it would work."

"That's only for exercise--!" I bit back a yell as I felt his long tongue run against the bite wound again, the tip slowly exploring each puncture and tear in the skin. The feeling was similar to whenever I licked my hand clean of messy food, but the aftereffect was ten times worse than pouring hydroperoxide on an open cut. After a few licks, Osomatsu spit something out before going back for another pass.

"Well, then apply whatever saying you deem appropriate to the situation," He finally released my right arm with a smile, waiting for me to examine whatever he had done.

The bite mark on my right arm had mostly vanished, the skin healed up but leaving a pale scar where each tooth was. The job wasn't as perfect and clean as when Karamatsu had healed my leg after Ichimatsu attacked, but the wound was sealed up. I noticed Osomatsu lift himself out of the water, using his arms to crawl next to me before reaching out to begin tearing off my pants left leg.

"Hey...!"

"How else am I going to get to your wound here? I'm not gonna rip off your pants completely," He chuckled, as if he was joking about a small prank instead of partially disrobing a woman. Osomatsu's eyes locked onto mine, and the smugness in them made me shudder. I knew I wouldn't be able to fight him off if he tried something. I was weaponless and the fight earlier clearly showed that he was a capable fighter.

"Do anything funny, and I'll rip off your fins," I narrowed my eyes and glared at Osomatsu.

"Okay, okay..." He trailed off as he sliced off the remaining shredded pants leg, using his nails to cut around my thigh. Tossing the ruined fabric onto the wooden dock, he licked his lips before lowering his head towards the highest wound, his tongue making contact with my skin. I threw my head back in a silent scream as I bit down a yell. Somehow, this one was much worse than my arm was, and I started to worry about the deep bite marks on my side.

I'd probably pass out from those.

Torn between focusing on something else than the pain and making sure that Osomatsu didn't do any kind of funny business, I lay completely flat against the wooden planks and tried some breathing techniques to help myself calm down from the pain. I felt Osomatsu move my leg around, but didn't hear him move from where he had settled.

Osomatsu carefully removed the salt crystals that had formed within (y/n)'s wound, knowing that she'd be in more pain if he left them in. He wanted her to swim again, more and more, in his ocean. Lowering his head back to her left calf, he continued to lick the claw marks as he felt her muscles and skin respond to the stimulation, speeding up their recovery and starting to close. It wasn't as pretty as Karamatsu used to do, but it was good enough for the current situation.

What he despised, though, was one of his rogue brothers had even dared to touch his property, especially when his claim was very much active.

Sure, he'd let his calm brothers mess with her a bit...but ultimately, (y/n) was

his

. The red coral on her neck proved it. How she got it was anyone's guess, as it was gifted to Totoko decades ago, but now it was around (y/n) and that's all that mattered.

He was surprised to hear its call three days ago, as Osomatsu didn't think Totoko could swim anymore in her frail age. To arrive near the coral edge to see Ichimatsu dragging a young woman down was quite entertaining to watch, and he didn't want to lose the new claim so easily.

"Are you done?" (Y/n)'s voice was pained, pulling him from his thoughts.

"Almost. You're quite impatient for a diver," Osomatsu smirked and gave the calf another lick to ensure that it fully closed.

"...! You're the one who has to heal me in a really embarrassing way," She draped an arm over her eyes, the other hand clenched into a tight fist.

"No one's here to see," He lowered her leg to take a look at the claw marks lining her outer thigh, "These shouldn't be as bad."

"Just do it quickly...I want to go home."

Moving over just a few more inches allowed Osomatsu to be in a better position, and he once again lowered his head as he lost himself in his thoughts. To be this close to his red coral again was comforting, but maddening at the same time. His property --

his claim

-- that he couldn't keep with him underwater. It was like being gifted a toy that he couldn't use.

As his tongue licked against (y/n)'s skin, he heard her whimper that wasn't timed with what he was doing.

"What's wrong?" He stopped and pushed himself up to look at her, his eyes taking in the tears pouring down her cheeks and sides of her face.

"I didn't want this...I just wanted to live a normal life by the ocean," Her voice came out choked by her tears, holding back the small hiccups she was starting to form. Her hands rubbed against her eyes, pushing out tears before they could fall, "Can't I just have my normal life back? Where I don't

have to worry about dying every time I want to swim, or where I can go somewhere without being targeted by someone?"

Osomatsu pushed himself up further and leaned over to look at her face, moving his left hand to caress her face. She stilled at his touch, looking up at the merman that blocked the night sky from her view, her warm tears running along his cold skin.

"What if I said that I'd be able to make all of your problems go away?" His voice was low and soft.

Chapter 10

I looked up at Osomatsu, stunned. His partially closed eyes held my own wide gaze as his left thumb rubbed against my cheek, as if trying to comfort me.

"Well, (y/n)?"

"I don't know."

Osomatsu pulled back a little bit, shock written all over his face, "What do you mean, 'you don't know'?"

"I mean that I actually don't know," I tried to move back a little bit but my side screamed in pain, still untouched by Osomatsu, "You're asking me a pretty serious question out of the blue without giving me any kind of detail. I don't know!"

He seemed to think about something before looking back down at me, "I guess you're right. I had meant that I could turn you into one of us, so that way you're not worried about being drowned whenever you swim. You'd be able to visit us whenever, of course, but you'd have to leave your land life behind."

Osomatsu sees you as a toy to play with, something to ease his boredom,

Genki's words bubbled to the surface of my thoughts, along with the image of his striking green eyes narrowed in warning. There was no telling how the oldest brother would react if I turned down his offer. I was less than a meter from the water, and his arms were on either side of my waist. My heart began to race in fear once more, and I started to open my mouth when Mrs. Yowai's words echoed in my head.

I'd suggest you get rid of it as soon as you can. Throw it back into the ocean where it came from. It will bring you nothing but trouble...though, I'm sure that getting rid of it now will do you no good.

I closed my mouth again and returned my focus to the merman propping himself over me.

"I need to think about it. That's a lot for me to sacrifice in order to have my aquatic problems go away," I took a breath, "Can you just finish what you started?"

Osomatsu paused before letting out a small chuckle that rolled into a loud laugh, eventually slowing down into a sigh.

"You entertain me more than I thought you would," He licked his lips before yanking up my shirt, quickly diving down to my side before I could yell out in protest. His left hand gripped the right side of my waist tightly as his right hand pulled the soaking wet office shirt tight above my left shoulder, the fabric caught under my left breast as the movement pinned me to the dock underneath him. I fought to keep the blush from spreading across my face, but the pain returned as I felt Osomatsu's tongue dip into one of the tooth marks, not being as gentle as he was with my leg wounds.

It was all I could do to keep myself quiet as it felt like fire was being poured into each bite wound, and I lost track of time as my consciousness began to fade from the pain.

I woke up staring at a familiar ceiling, my hands exploring the soft surface underneath me before I recognized the feeling of my bedsheets.

Who brought me home?

I sat up gently, expecting pain as I moved, but didn't feel anything wrong. I lifted up my night shirt to reveal scarring where the bites had been.

Night shirt?

"Oh, you're awa--!!" Someone cut themselves off verbally and I heard clattering sounds as I looked up towards my tiny kitchen, only to see a man

leaning over the counter with his back towards me. The scarring along his bare arms was unmistakable.

"Genki! Oh my gosh, I'm so sorry!!" I quickly pulled down my night shirt and hid my face in my hands, turtling in the comforter.

"I...I'll be fine..." I heard his muffled voice through the comforter, hearing him take a deep breath and go back to whatever he had messed with in his haste to turn away from my stupid semi-nude self, "I found you passed out on the docks near work earlier this morning on my run, and when you didn't wake up an hour before work, I called us both off."

"...thanks..." I muttered quietly.

"I had made a small pot of coffee, but I can make more if you'd like some, too," His voice moved from the kitchen to where my loveseat was, by the large window facing the ocean a half-kilometer away.

"...did you undress me...?" I asked as I peeked out from underneath the comforter, seeing his back still to me as he raised something to his face, probably the cup of coffee he was talking about. I saw him flinch and start coughing.

"Ah...no...when I brought you home, you seemed to be on autopilot after I set you down. You went to the bathroom and came out dressed like that before falling onto the bed. I figured you were pretty tired from your

morning swim

," He didn't turn around, but his voice seemed to grow stern, "I thought that we agreed on the actions you'd take after last night..."

I flinched from his tone, the embarrassment dropping in an instant. Genki seemed to be waiting for an answer as he remained facing away from me.

"We still are, and I meant everything I said after you explained the situation to me," I swallowed the sudden accumulation of saliva in my mouth, "But

my bus was involved in a freak accident last night, and I was forced into the sea."

"Are you all right?" Genki finally turned towards me, his worried green eyes meeting mine, "Is that why you were on the docks?"

"Yes...and no..." I lowered the comforter from my body after ensuring my night shirt was covering everything, "The bus was swept off the cliff near the ocean, and I was attacked by Jyushimatsu...I think. He had yellow markings all over his chest, and hurt me really bad before this...coral possibly summoned Osomatsu," I raised the vial still around my neck, "They fought and I was able to get away for a bit...but then Osomatsu carried me to a place close to my home and tried to heal me."

I hadn't heard Genki move before I felt his hands on my cheeks, lifting my face towards his as he knelt beside me. His emerald hues seemed to be swirling with some kind of emotion before he brought me close for a hug, his left arm encompassing my shoulders as his right hand slowly rubbed circles on my back. I returned the hug as much as I could before I started to cry. He didn't move as I buried my face into his left shoulder, my fists balling up the back of his shirt as I just let loose, knowing that someone seemed truly worried for me about what I was going through...despite his family being the ones tormenting me.

Chapter 11

I don't remember how long I cried, nor did I really care. Genki didn't budge from his kneeling position, despite how hard it might've been on his knees, and kept quiet as I let everything out -- my anger, confusion, sadness, and anxiety. All of it turned into tears that began to soak his left shoulder and upper sleeve.

I sluggishly opened my eyes to see the wall next to my bed, lightly groaning as I moved to sit up from underneath the heavy blankets.

I must've fallen asleep again...

I rubbed my eyes and yawned before looking towards the loveseat near the window, seeing Genki sitting there with a book propped open against his crossed legs. The sun had dipped down to peek into the window, signifying that it was close to the evening. Making sure to not repeat the same mistake as this morning, I wrapped the topmost blanket around my body before getting out of bed, moving towards the bathroom to freshen up.

Locking the door behind me, I pulled out a loose fitting shirt and flannel pajama pants out of the clean laundry basket before taking a look in the mirror, realizing that I should take a bath to freshen up first. Scrubbing myself and rinsing off as fast as I could, I didn't bother to soak for very long and instead opted to dry off immediately. Slipping on the appropriate undergarments and clean clothes, I stepped out of the bathroom with a towel wrapped around my hair and glanced towards where Genki was seated.

"Are you feeling a little better?" Genki looked over to watch me move towards the kitchen, neatly putting down the book on the little coffee table next to the loveseat.

"Yeah..." I softly muttered before opening the fridge to grab the last small bottle of milk, popping off the seal and drinking it sip by sip. Ruffling my

hair with the towel for the last time, I tossed the coarse fabric sheet into the bathroom before walking towards the loveseat and sitting on the little ottoman stool in front of it. I finished the small bottle of milk before shoving my right arm in front of Genki's face, letting him fully see the scars that were absent the day before.

"(L/n)...?" His voice was full of confusion before his eyes settled on the individual scars that formed a perfect semi-circle on either side of my forearm, the jagged edges of the skin crudely healed together.

"There are more, Genki. This is what Jyushimatsu did to me last night," I fought past the memories full of fear as the yellow merman toyed with me, biting and scratching me as I tried to breathe, "I could've...no, I would've died with the amount of blood that I lost."

"From just this?"

"No, from these," I pulled up the shirt to where he could see the scars on my left side. When I was sure that he had seen them, I let my shirt go and rolled up the loose left pant leg all the way to my hip, revealing the rough scars on my calf and hamstring, "And these."

Genki had moved his right hand to his mouth, completely covering it in what I could only call astonishment as his eyes continued to take in the scars. I let him look for a few more moments before I relaxed the fabric and sat back down on the ottoman, putting the milk bottle aside.

"That wasn't all that happened...Karamatsu," I looked towards the floor, unsure of how he'd react to me using his real name, "Your older brother told me that he could 'make all of my problems go away' as he was...cleaning...my wounds. I didn't give him an answer and instead told him that I'd think about it," I moved to look right at him, "I know I'm over my head already, but you're the only one who seems to be on my side. What should I do?"

His body shifted from leaning forward to relaxing against the back cushions of the loveseat, his hand falling away from his mouth. I watched as his eyes

flicked back and forth, as if assessing all the possible answers before settling on one he'd vocalize.

"I can give you suggestion after suggestion as to what to do, but ultimately the choice is only yours to make. You can move to somewhere safer in the mainland, somewhere far away from any large body of water. You

could

," His voice seemed to falter for a brief moment, "accept Osomatsu's offer and any consequence that comes with it. You could decline it and possibly be in further danger," Karamatsu shifted in his seat, seemingly uncomfortable all of a sudden, "I could make the choice for you, but that wouldn't be fair to you."

I took in a silent breath as he made suggestions of what I could do. A thought popped into my head, and I bit my inner bottom lip, "I want you to tell me the worst outcomes that could happen. If I'm going to make a choice, I'd rather have everything laid out before me so I know what I'm getting into..."

Seemingly satisfied with the comment, Karamatsu leans back forward, "What do you want to know?"

"Tell me what could happen if I accept Osomatsu's offer of 'making my problems go away'."

"He's a bored nigh-immortal merman that likes to have fun no matter the cost to anyone else. If he's implying what I think he is, he means to turn you into a mermaid," Karamatsu rubbed his hands together briefly, "That means that he'll have to essentially rework your body to function in the water. It'll be a painful process, as your lungs will shift to a respiratory system similar to external gills in order to replace what the lungs will leave behind. Your legs will be broken and melded together as the skin hardens and cracks into scales, some parts stretching into fins, as your feet melt and extend into a caudal fin. Your intestines will rearrange themselves...but if you're lucky enough, you'll pass out in the beginning phases."

I blanked at his statement. My mind couldn't contemplate the process of my body ripping itself to pieces in order to survive in a completely different environment. I had to keep going, though. I needed to know what else could happen.

"Okay...what about if I say 'no'?"

"If you say 'no', then I'd highly suggest moving to the mainland as soon as you're able, just to be sure that you're safe. Choromatsu gave me an idea of how powerful Osomatsu has become over the past few decades, and I'd rather have you be over-prepared if you make this choice," Karamatsu barely reached out his left hand towards me before instantly retracting it, "If not the mainland, than live somewhere where the oceans can't touch you. In my mind, if he finds out you're still here after rejecting his offer, Japan will have its worst tsunami season yet."

"He's capable of doing that? Creating such massive storms?"

"If he wants to," He pointed towards my neck, "You're going to have to get rid of that first, though."

"The coral?" I pull out the vial necklace, looking down at it.

"Yeah. It's like a tracking device for him, or for any one of my brothers if you had our signature coral type...It'll send out a signal whenever you're in trouble that only the brother related to it can hear. You know that feeling of someone calling your attention without them saying your name?"

"Yeah...?"

"It's similar to that, but much stronger."

I purse my lips together before ripping the vial necklace off of my neck, the worn down corded rope breaking behind my neck, and I shove it towards Karamatsu, "Then take it! I don't know what to do with it, or how to even get rid of it."

The composure of Karamatsu's relaxed form suddenly shifted as the vial got closer to him, his body leaping out of his seat and towards the opposite end of the loveseat, his eyes wide and his chest heaving as if he had just run a great distance.

What the...?

"I...I can't touch it," Karmatsu's voice was soft, despite the harsh look he was giving the vial, "We can only touch our own coral type...every other coral is like poison to us. I don't know how to explain it very well...that coral chunk marks you as Osomatsu's claim -- his property. I can touch

you

, but I'll be very badly injured if I touch

that

," He points to the subject on each emphasis, "You're the only one who can get rid of it, but I can tell you how. You just need to crush the coral. It's really simple, but it prevents my other brothers from claiming...sorry...from having someone by their side that they didn't work for."

"So this little thing is what you brothers give to someone...is it similar to a marriage proposal?" I brought the vial closer to me, inspecting the red coral inside closely to see if there was anything special about it.

"Metal rusts after a long time underwater, so we came up with

that

as our solution. We have yet to give ours to anyone...except Osomatsu forced his onto Totoko and, decades later, you somehow got it," Karamatsu started to settle back into his former seat, keeping an eye on the vial the entire time.

"Wait...you said that it sends some kind of signal whenever I'm in trouble? Could that explain why he was the one to rescue me from Ichimatsu and Jyushimatsu?" I put the vial next to the empty milk bottle on the table, away

from Karamatsu. When he saw its resting location, he finally looked back at me.

"That's more than likely the answer."

That son of a...

"Okay, so...I'm not liking Osomatsu more and more with the info that keeps getting revealed to me," I pull up my right leg to rest my head on the knee, "One more question for my options, I guess..."

"Go ahead."

I paused before opening my mouth, "What if I can get another brother to...'put his claim' on me? Would that stop most of this drama from happening...?" I turned my face away, burying my left cheek into my knee while giving my kitchen a focused stare, trying to ignore the heat in my face. I heard Karamatsu try to speak multiple times, his position shifting every so often as the silence became drawn out.

I may have crossed the line...

"Regardless of what brother you're thinking of, you'll have to get rid of the red coral first," Karamatsu coughed a little to clear his throat, "To be honest, this choice may be the worst one to take. Osomatsu will feel the ties sever from his coral as soon as it's crushed, and that will more than likely throw him into a rage. He hates losing, but he hates losing to his brothers even more. He'll take this as a challenge to his...to what he thinks is his, and there'll most likely be fighting between him and whichever brother you choose."

"I'm not going to get out of this decision scot-free, am I?" I sighed and barely glanced back at Karamatsu. He had shifted to face the ocean, his left side towards me.

"Not completely, I'm afraid. Some seem more appealing than others, I do admit, but I will not take that choice from you," He looked back towards me, the sun reflecting off his green eyes that were partially hidden by the

falling dark swept bangs. I stood up, taking the vial and milk bottle with me to the kitchen. Disposing of the bottle, I set the vial down on the counter and leaned over to stare at it, as if it would tell me the answer I was searching for.

I'm here now. There's no point in whining about being forced into this situation. I'll have to...

Choice Poll Closed!

It looks like Reader will be going after another brother to replace Osomatsu's coral!

The choices made were for Choromatsu or Ichimatsu, so we'll see what happens.

Chapter 12

...I'll have to find another brother to replace Osomatsu's coral,

I put a knuckle to my lips,

But doesn't that mean I could ask Karamatsu for his...?

"Yen for your thoughts?" Karamatsu shook his head slightly to toss his bangs away from his eyes.

"Yeah..." I stood up fully from leaning over the vial on the counter, going over to rearrange my bed as my mind still processed the choices I had in front of me, "I'm thinking...that I may find a brother to replace Osomatsu's coral."

"If that's what you'd like," He didn't move from his spot.

"Would you be able to tell me who would be the safest to ask?" I winced as I realized the words I said after they left my mouth. I hesitantly put my pillow back in place before looking over my shoulder towards Karamatsu.

I barely caught the look of hurt flash across his face before he faced the floor, the sunset shadowing his reaction.

"I'm sorry...I didn't mean to--" I moved to sit down on the ottoman.

"I can tell you about them, instead...The two that went rogue are Todomatsu and Jyushimatsu, our two youngest brothers. The fates deemed it necessary that our family was cursed with a madness to balance our abilities, but we haven't been able to figure out the trigger for it. It just turns you into a primal predator that only lives for the thrill of the hunt," Karamatsu took a deep breath before continuing, "The third youngest is Ichimatsu, and he's probably the most violent person you'd meet out of the remaining four. Last I recall, his abilities are more suited for deep water, as he can manipulate

the darkness with ease. He's in danger of going rogue, though, but there may be a chance that giving his coral could stop that altogether.

"You've already met Choromatsu, who's likely the most stable out of the remaining brothers, but he's been taking it upon himself to keep Totoko safe until she passes. He's able to somewhat control the water, allowing it to bend to his will. It's a weaker form of what Todomatsu is able to do, but it seems to work just as well.

"Then there's me, the second oldest. As you've seen, I'm stuck on land while my brothers roam the oceans. I still don't know if that's a good thing or not. I still retain my abilities from when I was a merman, which is mainly healing wounds and illness. It's not of much use for offensive abilities, but it's the main reason why I'm still alive today," He clenched a fist before looking back up at me with a small smile. I felt like it was the first genuine smile from Karamatsu that I ever received.

"Lastly is Osomatsu. Being the first-born of us brothers had somehow granted him the most power, both offensively and defensively. He's able to control water, heal, and influence the air to a certain extent. He's also the strongest out of all of us, and seems to have a drive to fight. Since it's obvious that you're not going to keep his coral, I can tell you what I know he can do," He sat up in the loveseat and pulled out his phone, swiping through something before aiming the screen at me. It showed a Wikipedia article about the 2011 Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami. I remembered volunteering to dive for shore cleanup, wanting to clear away what I could with the people I was teamed with.

"No way..." I covered my mouth with a free hand, looking in shock as Karamatsu pulled his phone back, "That bastard nearly set off a nuclear meltdown! What the hell?!"

"That was when he got into a fight with Ichimatsu, before he started showing signs of going rogue. Osomatsu doesn't seem to care about the effects of his actions, so I want to give you a fair warning before you start talking to any of my other brothers about taking their coral," Karamatsu gave me a stern glare, only looking away after I nodded.

The sun began to dip beneath the horizon, and I glanced over at Karamatsu.

"Thanks...for staying with me, and for telling me everything."

"If you're stuck going to be my brothers, I want you to know everything that I can tell you," He stood up, raising his arms and stretching before moving towards the front door.

"I'm gonna take the next two days off...I feel like I need time to myself and think through things," I followed him, holding the door open as he put his shoes on before stepping outside.

"You have my number. Call or message me if there's anything else I can help with," He waved farewell as he started walking down the hall.

"Ka...Genki!" I called out, remembering that he wanted to hide his name, "I'll see you at work afterwards, okay?"

There was no verbal response, only a thumbs up to indicate that he heard me.

I found myself standing on the beach as the sunlight left the sky, the winds turning colder almost instantly. Tucking my hands into my hoodie pockets, I took a slow breath in as the waves lazily lapped against the shore, not surprised that I couldn't stay away from the water for very long. I had donned my breathable sporting shorts and flip-flops, but stayed away from the shoreline as I walked. I kept thinking about the choices I had, and the one I made in regards to the mermen.

I feel like I'm stuck between a hard place and Osomatsu's rage...

A loud splash from behind an outcropping of rocks caught my attention, my curiosity slowly taking over as I made my way towards the general direction of the noise. Peering around the edge of the rock, I could see the continuation of the shoreline...and a limp humanoid body. I held my breath

as I tiptoed around the reach of the person, seeing the scales reflect the weak moonlight from the night sky.

It's...Ichimatsu...

Chapter 13

The merman that had tried to kill me twice only a few days ago was laying limply on the shoreline. I looked around for any sort of stick that I could use to see if he was still alive, but didn't see any lengthy flotsam nearby, slowly making my way closer to Ichimatsu.

"Ichimatsu...?" I kept my left hand on the rock outcropping for some sort of security, reaching out with my right hand to lightly touch his head. I didn't see any kind of movement from him, only watching his back rise and fall with his breath. Ichimatsu was laying face down in the sand, claw marks all around him as if he was trying to escape the water. The cloud cover unveiled more of the moon and I realized that he was wounded.

Blood trailed from several scratches and bite marks, staining the sand underneath him a dark red. I looked towards his tail and saw the wounds continue, practically covering his whole body. There were several puncture wounds on his back, the skin slightly swelling.

Lionfish stings...Osomatsu!

"Don't do anything funny, Ichimatsu. I'm going to bring you back to my apartment. You need to be treated immediately," I called out to the seemingly unconscious merman, grabbing underneath both of his arms and dragging him away from the water. I'd seen him talk above the water before, but I had no idea how much truth there was to the mermaid mythos of the creatures breathing air. I put both of his arms over my shoulders and tried to lift him onto my back.

He was

heavy

.

Groaning, I walked as quickly as I could along the softest path so I didn't damage the tail that inevitably trailed behind me, the damn thing nearly doubling his length. I struggled to open my door, but was able to maneuver the merman into my tub, filling it with hot water as I went back to close the front door. I brought my laptop from underneath my bed to the laundry room, waiting patiently for the bath to fill up as I looked for mermaid lore. I didn't think I'd need to take care of one, but here I was -- my smart self bringing the merman that tried to kill me twice into my own home.

Turning the water off as the surface began to lap at the top of the bathwell, I kept an eye on Ichimatsu's face as I reached down to circulate the water underneath his back. His eyes slowly opened and locked onto my face only a few feet from his.

"...what the hell?!" His eyes cleared from a foggy look to a sharp glare, pushing away from me and nearly landing outside of the bath, "What the fuck do you think you're doing?!"

"Keeping you from losing the skin on your back..." I backed away instantly, not wanting to fight an angry merman, "I found you on the beach shoreline close to home. I didn't want you to suffer--"

"So now you're acting like a fake hero? Careful to not ruin your reputation as a fake that 'cares about nature'," He scoffed, his top lip curling upwards in disgust, "No one asked for your help, and I certainly don't need it."

"You may not have asked for it, but I didn't want you dying...as twisted as that is. Besides, you're probably gonna be stuck in that tub until you're better. I'm nowhere close enough for you to get back to the sea on your own," I crossed my arms and held his gaze, "You're just gonna have to deal with it for now."

"...you bitch..."

"Oh, shut up. Just get back in the tub and sit for a little while," I began to leave the bathroom, reaching out for my laptop when I heard water being splashed. I turned towards the sound as a glob of water splattered against

me, completely soaking my clothes. I opened my eyes to see a sneering Ichimatsu.

"You're welcome..." I growled before grabbing a clean towel and a change of clothes, stomping out of the room with laptop in hand.

"...hey...heeey..." Ichimatsu's voice called from the bathroom.

"What," I responded from my bed, the laptop propped up on my legs as I lay underneath the covers. Nothing I found over the past few hours had been any help, and the only things that popped up under 'mermaid care' were from forum boards about taking care of a silicone mermaid tail.

"Why did you bring me here?"

"It was an impulse because you had lionfish stings on your back. The ocean doesn't have any readily available hot water, as far as I know, so I brought you home to have you soak in my tub...that has hot water," I closed the internet tab I was currently on, going back to reading e-books to keep my mind calm.

"...why did you bring

me

here?" I heard the emphasis this time.

"It was an impulse, like I said. Sorry that this

fake

wasn't really thinking straight at the time of seeing your unconscious body on the shoreline."

"You're wasting your time on this trash...

this unburnable piece of garbage

." The last bit caught my ear, despite it being close to a whisper. I gently closed my laptop and got out of bed, opening the door to the bathroom. Ichimatsu was laying his head on his folded arms, propped up on the side of the bath, while he had managed to curl up his tail completely in the water. The water level had dropped some, but if he wasn't complaining about it, I wasn't going to refill it.

"I heard that..."

"Whoo-hoo. Good for you," His eyes flicked over to me before closing and turning his head away from me.

"I don't think I'm wasting my time. It gives me an opportunity to get to know you -- the

real

you -- Ichimatsu. Since our last parting was you trying to bite my shoulder, I figured that we could maybe get to know each other properly," I pulled the bath stool from its resting place and put it near the center of the bathroom.

"It's not worth it. You're already with Osomatsu and I've taken too many beatings from him in regards to you," He huffed.

"I'm not wearing it anymore."

Ichimatsu quickly turned his head towards me, his eyes darting towards my bare neck before travelling up to meet my eyes. The look of shock in his black hues was swiftly covered up by suspicion.

"What's your game...?"

"I'm not playing any game, last I looked. Your family drama dragged me into this mess, and I'm trying to get out. Karamatsu has told me a lot, but there's still more that I want to know," I scratched the back of my head, "To be honest, I'm still trying to figure out what's going on, but in the meantime, I wanted to try to get to know the brothers that aren't rogue yet."

"You're crazy," His eyes narrowed.

"Probably, but you're the one that introduced me to this crazy family first when you almost killed me," I glared at Ichimatsu. He flinched back, but kept looking at me.

"It sounds like you know everything already...there's no need to ask me anything."

"Karamatsu seems to think that if you claim me, it could stop you from going rogue."

This stopped whatever thoughts were in his head, as Ichimatsu's face dropped into complete disbelief. The realization of what I implied hit me as my face began to flush, but that didn't take away the truth from my statement. I slightly turned away as my mind began to race with what to say next.

"Are you doing this because you want to, or because you were told to?" Ichimatsu's voice was quiet against the sloshing of water.

"I decided that I was going to get rid of his coral by...taking another brother's coral," I heard wet skin hit the tiled floor, looking over to see Ichimatsu crawling out of the tub towards me, his face hidden by his hair. I stood up and backed away, my back hitting the wall behind me as I tried to keep my voice stable, "So...it's of my own choice that I brought you here, and since I don't know any of you that well outside of what Karamatsu has told me...I thought I should get to know you all."

"You...don't want Osomatsu's coral...?" I couldn't place the emotion in his voice, "You don't want...to be his...?" He continued to crawl closer, his left hand now on my left leg. His grip was unbelievably strong.

"No, I don't," I weakly responded, fear laced heavily in my voice. His body trembled for a brief moment before he looked up at me, his eyes filled with tears and his lips quivering.

"Thank goodness...thank goodness...!" He lowered himself to the floor, wrapping his arms around himself and letting out a wail, similar to a child crying out of relief. I couldn't help but put a hand on his head, gently

rubbing it to try and comfort him. Still crying, his arms reached out and wrapped around my torso, pulling me fully to the floor and holding me close.

If just the news of me not wanting Osomatsu's claim brought this kind of reaction...how hurt are the rest of the brothers? What kind of terror has Osomatsu done to them...?

Chapter 14

I tapped an index finger gently against my chin, partially twirling a pen in my writing hand as my mind raced with questions to ask the brothers, the writing pad in front of me remaining empty. It had been a few hours since I was in the bathroom, helping Ichimatsu back into the tub and refilling it with warmer water. He had exhausted himself crying and didn't stir when I moved him. I closed my eyes and thought back to the marks on his skin, scars that had healed over with fresher wounds crossing over them.

Giving up on looking to the internet for any kind of help, I kept thinking about how I was going to get to know each brother and grabbed a pad of paper just in case I thought of something good, but it remained empty. Clicking the pen for the umpteenth time, I finally put the tip on paper and began to write down what I did know about the brothers from what Karamatsu had told me.

Writing down each brother's name, I scribbled what I remembered of their abilities. I could only guess that they all kept to national waters due to Mrs. Yowai still living here, but I couldn't help but think that there was another reason.

I just didn't know what it was yet.

I yawned widely before looking over at the clock, the digital numbers reading '04:39' with a small 'AM' next to them. Thankful for calling the office a little earlier to let my boss know I wouldn't be in for the day, I dropped the pad and pen next to my bed, pulling the covers over me as I settled my head onto my pillow.

"I didn't expect to find you near

him

," A cheerful male voice called out, making me blink out of my sleep. I opened my eyes to see a handsome man leaning in front of me, some kind of pink coral keeping his bangs out of his eyes. He moved towards me, his hands propping himself up as he 'walked' along the sand.

Sand?

I looked around and saw the bright surface of the ocean moving in waves above me, glistening in the light of the afternoon sun. I gasped instinctively before putting my hand over my mouth, expecting bubbles to escape before I didn't feel the usual pressure of water around me. Taking a tentative gasp, there was barely any feeling of rushing liquid down my throat, prompting another breath before taking a full one, confusion rising in my system a little.

I could somehow

breathe

under the water.

I glanced back at the man to see a large billowing tail behind him, his gigantic pectoral, dorsal, and anal fins equally as magnificent as his tail, mimicking a betta fish. Bright pinks faded into white as they trailed along the whole tail, ending in a pure white border on each fin. The merman moved his head to hold my gaze, his hands now moving towards my legs as he slowly inched closer.

"My brothers aren't being very fair to me..." His voice whined, a childish pout pulling the corners of his lips down, "After all, you're such a cutie, and they want to keep you away from me."

"You're...Todomatsu," I whispered, guessing the name.

"Ding, ding, ding! You're correct!" A sly smile spread across his face as his pupils narrowed, "I've been wanting to meet you for so long, but haven't had the chance. You must be something

special

if you've got us fighting each other."

"You're wrong. I want nothing to do with whatever your family has dragged me into...!" My voice is cut off by a hand suddenly squeezing my throat.

"Then you won't mind if I force you out of the equation."

This is a dream...I gotta wake up...!

I gritted my teeth together and tried to expand my throat, but the crushing strength of his hand was too strong for the muscles to fight against. I blinked a few times and watched as Todomatsu began changing rapidly; black flooded his eyes to leave the irises glowing pink, matching the spiralling markings that began to creep onto his shoulders and chest. I tried to pry his hand away from my throat to get a small breath in.

"...(y/n)...!" I heard a voice echo in my ears, and Todomatsu's pleased expression shifted into a sour look.

"Damn...out of time already?" He clicked his tongue before releasing his grip on me, harshly slamming his tail onto the sand underneath and spurring up a sand cloud. I covered my face with my arms against the onslaught, losing sight of Todomatsu and opening my eyes to see a frantic Ichimatsu above me. I felt his grip on my shoulders as he shook me back and forth, his eyes wide with worry.

I opened my mouth to speak, but coughed up water instead.

"Ah...shit, what do I do...?" Ichimatsu quickly rolled me onto my side in a rushed recovery position. I felt a tiled floor underneath me as my body fought to learn how to breathe again.

"Ichimatsu...what the hell just happened?" I managed between sputtering coughs, my hands tightening into fists as pain and panic flooded my nerves.

"Huh? You were trying to drown yourself, crazy woman," He scoffed, "You just stumbled in and just dunked your head under the water. When the

bubbles stopped, I realized that you still needed to bring me back to the ocean, and I didn't want to be discovered with your dead body."

I paused, a few choice words popping into my head before I looked back up at Ichimatsu. He was propping himself out of the tub, looking away from me as he removed his left hand from my shoulder before moving back a little.

"Did you hear me say something, or see anything strange when I walked in?"

"You're awfully calm about this," He raised an eyebrow as he looked back at me, moving his head away a little in confusion.

"Please just answer!" I almost yelled out, my voice threatening to break.

"Yeah, I did. There was a weird humming sound, but I thought that it was coming from you."

"It wasn't," I sat up and pushed my sopping wet hair out of my face, "How well do you know Todomatsu?"

"Totty? It's been a while since I've seen him, but I don't see why he's--"

"Ichimatsu, he's a siren," I cut him off, "He's a siren and he just tried to kill me!"

Ichimatsu just looked at me for a moment before scoffing, raising an eyebrow as if to mock me.

"Yeah, right. You're just being crazy and blaming my brother for something you just failed to do."

"I may be crazy, but I would

never

entertain the idea of offing myself to get out of any situation," I faced him fully, "You may joke about it, but I don't."

Standing up took some effort, but I was out of the bathroom before Ichimatsu could stop me. I shoved a pair of shoes onto my feet and left the apartment, frustration building in my head. I wanted to get out of the situation Ichimatsu had literally dragged me into, and when I finally had a plan of what I was going to do, another brother tried to kill me. Couldn't they understand that I was trying to help in the only way I could? Why couldn't they just leave me alone?

Why me? Why (l/n) (y/n)?

I stopped mid-stride and mid-thought.

Why not me? I'd rather it happen to me than to another person who's weaker-willed.

I glanced over towards the black abyss of ocean spread along the horizon, knowing that there were four brothers out there. I didn't have any friends that I could run to about this problem, nor any family that lived close by. Everyone that I really knew was back on the mainland of Japan. I moved here for work purposes and to find experience for my college's program.

A shudder rippled through my body as a brisk breeze swept by, my damp head not doing me any favors.

I knew that I had a time limit on this decision, but I didn't realize it was this short.

I took a deep breath in and turned around to head back to my apartment. Closing the door behind me, I swiftly moved towards the bathroom. Seeing Ichimatsu barely lift his head to look at me, I lowered myself into a grovelling position with my forehead pressed to the floor.

"What--"

"Please, Ichimatsu. I need your help," I cut him off, "I need to know more information about your family, and there's only two people I can think of that may be willing to help. I need you to take me to Choromatsu and Mrs. Yowai."

Chapter 15

"No."

I was cut off mid-question by the elderly woman sitting near the water, a picnic blanket spread out underneath her to keep the food off of the sand. I closed my mouth and got down on my knees, digging my forehead into the sand.

"Please, Mrs. Yowai. I don't want to bother Karamatsu with this issue, and you two are the only ones I feel like I can turn to," I tried to speak as clearly as I could.

"I gave you enough warning to get rid of the damn thing, yet here you are: grovelling at my breakfast meal and begging me for more information about the idiot brothers," Her voice was sharp and commanding, making me feel like I was the one at fault for asking. I heard a soft muttering behind me, where Ichimatsu and Choromatsu were probably talking to each other, but I didn't pay attention to any words they were saying.

Taking a moment to think, I tried to remember everything that had happened the past few days and what was at risk in the future. I had almost died twice, temporarily sheltered my potential murderer, was claimed by a childish merman, worked with a merman-turned-human somehow, and was now grovelling on a beach in front of an elderly woman wearing my diving skinsuit.

What had my life turned into?

"Totoko, I wouldn't mind answering her questions," I heard Choromatsu raise his voice from the shoreline, "I'm not sure how much help I can be, but I'd like to try."

"Do what you want," I heard Mrs. Yowai huff before her chopsticks started moving again. I slightly raised my head to see her look dismissively at me before focusing on her food, getting up from my kneeling position and

moving over towards the water's edge. Choromatsu was in the same position I had seen him last time, and Ichimatsu was closer to the rocky outcropping that framed Mrs. Yowai's private beach, staring out into the open water.

"So, what else do you want to know?" The smile widened on his lips.

"That's just it. I'm not sure...I was given a lot of information from Karamatsu, and I kinda figured out stuff on my own, but now I'm just..." I sat a few feet away from him, putting my chin on my knees, "...listless."

"Ichimatsu told me a little bit of what you told him, the part about possibly being able to remove the curse we have," Choromatsu didn't move any closer towards me, but I felt an uneasiness wash over me, "In my opinion, we're all shitty brothers that deserve whatever we get, especially for all of the things we did in our younger years. But I'm glad that you think you can help us, somehow."

"Don't have much of a choice at this point."

"Well...you could've still walked away," He chuckled.

"That doesn't sit right with me. Being compassionate is one of my faults."

"Regardless, start throwing out some questions, and I'll answer what I can."

I asked the first thing that came to mind after taking a moment to think, "When did this 'curse' start appearing?"

"Well, Jyushimatsu was the first one to start acting weird, and that was--" He paused as he curled an index finger against his chin, scrunching his eyebrows together in thought, "I'm going to say nearly one-hundred years ago, so fairly recently. He went full rogue about fifty years ago, and Todomatsu started acting weird around the same time."

"So, now that Todomatsu is fully rogue, Ichimatsu is starting to act weird?"

"Ehh, each brother has their quirks..." He drifted off before regaining his train of thought, "But I'd say yes."

"It seems to be a fifty year gap between when one of your brothers acts odd and when they turn wild," I looked over at Ichimatsu, making direct eye contact as he stared right back at me. The uncomfortable feeling returned seven-fold as I noticed the rims of his eyes were barely glowing a dull purple, outlining the dark irises. Ichimatsu didn't seem to notice me staring at him, or didn't care that I was.

"You're a licensed diver, right?" Choromatsu swam out a bit into the shallower water, putting himself directly between me and Ichimatsu. I blinked a few times before focusing back on the green merman.

"Ah, yeah...I actually moved here from the mainland because of the diving opportunities," I fiddled with the zipper of my skinsuit.

"That's cool. So, tell me what you do at your job. Karamatsu told me some things, but I just find people that choose to spend their lives in the water to be fascinating," Choromatsu closed his eyes and gave a wide smile.

"Well, there's not a lot that requires diving at my job, but it's nice to be able to help out when they need divers for certain studies or recovery events," I didn't move into the water, staying where I was, "I hope to team up with some biologists and do a full study. That'd be interesting to do."

"Sounds like it'd be very intensive for you. Oh," Choromatsu looked behind me and waved, "Have a good day, Totoko!"

"Yeah, yeah..." Her mumbling followed the footsteps walking up the wooden staircase back to her house. I turned to look, seeing the woman hauling the basket and cloth up with her, taking each step with certainty. I stilled when I felt a cold hand rest on my right hand, the waterline teasing my fingertips.

"Care to go for a swim?" The joyful tone didn't match the look in Choromatsu's eyes as I turned to look at him, black sclera and bright green irises glowing brightly as my eyes widened in realization. I didn't have a chance to react before I was yanked from my sitting position into the cold morning water, taking whatever air I could before my head was dragged under the water. I quickly zipped up the rest of my skinsuit, knowing that

the cold water would kill me before my lack of air did. The shallow water quickly turned into a wide basin, possibly four to five meters down.

The grip Choromatsu had on my hand began to tighten as I tried to pry off his fingers, attempting to twist my hand around and pull free. The light from the morning sun reflected off of the green scales of Choromatsu's tail, the pattern of the dark and light greens creating a mesmerizing display as his tail slowly stopped moving.

"You know, I was really worried that you wouldn't come back to me, (y/n)," Choromatsu turned towards me and pulled me closer, pressing me against his chest that was now covered with glowing markings, "I never thought that you'd ditch my shitty older brother's claim, and even ignore Karamatsu's interest in you."

I couldn't refute anything he was saying, not with the threat of drowning all around me. He took off a small brain coral from the head piece and brought it closer to my face, his smile twisting into a sneer as he switched the movement from my head to my chest, lightly pressing it against the skinsuit on my sternum.

Is he trying to claim me...? Not gonna happen!

I pushed hard against his chest, shoving him away as I kicked out of his immediate reach. I knew that I didn't have much of a chance, but I still had to give it a shot. I was surprised to feel a hand brush against my own, instantly grabbing a hold and pulling me upwards through an unexpected curtain of bubbles, hidden by the light reflecting off the water and the scales from Choromatu's tail. The bubbles pushed me forward and I reached the surface, sputtering and clinging onto something.

"...sorry I wasn't faster," Ichimatsu's voice rumbled against my chest, making me realize that he was holding me as he swam backwards, closer towards the rocky outcropping.

"Just get me to land..."

"Ichi...she wanted to be mine..." I felt the water start to solidify somehow as Ichimatsu tried to pull me with him, the density thickening into something like honey.

Choromatsu could control water...!

"Choromatsu, you're not yourself right now. Let me stay on land while you calm yourself down!" I tried to plead as I felt a pair of hands grip my waist while Ichimatsu held onto my wrist, the water actively trying to pull me away from him. It felt like being in a rushing river, but knowing that you were in a calm body of water.

I was in a losing battle, and I couldn't see myself getting out of it without being claimed. Pinned between two mermen, both of who were in danger of going rogue, I didn't have much of a choice. I took a breath...

Choice Poll Closed!!

It looks like the majority wants to fight their way out of the situation!

I'll update later on today with the new chapter. =)

Chapter 16

"Osomatsu!!" I cried out, hoping he wouldn't actually hear me. The water surrounding me instantly stilled and I saw a look of shock appear on Ichimatsu's face. I took advantage of their surprise and dragged Ichimatsu closer towards Choromatsu, hoping to throw some kind of interference before I swam as quickly as I could towards the breakwater. I dragged myself out of the ocean and safely onto the highest rock, almost running towards the shore and further safety.

At least, that was the plan.

As I opened my mouth to yell out Osomatsu's name, Ichimatsu clamped his hand over my mouth, his eyes flickering wildly between their normal dark color and the glowing purple tint. His eyes seemed to catch movement behind me before looking back at me, his hands sliding down towards my waist and gripping it tightly, the skinsuit more than likely punctured by his talons. With a vicious pull, I was yanked from the water's grasp and thrown into the air, the sudden change in altitude leaving me slightly nauseous.

I landed on the sand without much grace and looked back towards the roiling water where Ichimatsu had thrown me from. I couldn't go back in, not with both brothers possibly fighting each other while turning rogue, but it didn't feel right to just stand still either. As I started moving back towards the water, I felt a hand harsly pull at my shoulder before shoving me away from the water's edge. I followed the arm up to see the back of Genki, or rather Karamatsu.

"Stay here."

It was a simple phrase, but the weighted command in his voice was enough to root my feet in place, only watching as he walked into the water and dived underneath the surface. He sounded mad.

Is he upset at me?

The furious waters calmed, and the natural waves began to lick at the beach sands again. Shortly after, I saw Karamatsu dragging both Ichimatsu and Choromatsu onto the shoreline by their wrists, the two younger mermen unconscious. He pulled them up until their tail fins were completely out of the water, kneeling next to them and mumbling something.

"Kara--"

"Tell me what happened."

Another command came before I flinched away. I'd never heard him be this stern, even at work.

"I...uh, I found Ichimatsu wounded last night on the beach near my apartment, and I recognized the wounds as lionfish stings. I thought he got into a fight with Osomatsu, so I took him to my apartment to treat him. I..." I struggled to find the right words, "I had met the last of your brothers in a dream. Todomatsu. The event scared me so much that I didn't think through what had happened, and wanted to ask Choromatsu and Mrs. Yowai about it, but she didn't want to answer anything. Choromatsu volunteered some answers, but changed when Mrs. Yowai left the beach."

Karamatsu turned around to face me fully, a neutral look on his face. I felt shame wash over me like a cold wave, feeling like I did everything wrong despite me not wanting to ruin anything.

"I know I messed up..." I looked down at the sand, "I should've just stayed home last night."

I was cut off by a sudden hug, a pair of warm muscular arms wrapping around my shoulders and back.

"You're safe, and that's all that matters," Karamatsu's voice rumbled in his chest, his arms releasing me from their hold as he turned to face his two younger brothers lying on the sand, "Now, what do I do with you two...?"

"What did you do to them?" I leaned to the right, looking around Karamatsu's frame to see both mermen starting to stir back to

consciousness.

"Nothing that I wouldn't do if I was still in the ocean," He chuckled and raised his right hand towards his face, seemingly to wipe something away before looking back down at his brothers, "Now that you're waking up, care to tell me what that spat was all about? You're disturbing Totoko."

"It wasn't my fault. Shitty Fappymatsu couldn't keep himself under control, and nearly claimed (y/n) in his tantrum," Ichimatsu rolled into a sitting position, tucking some of his tail underneath his chin and crossed arms. I noticed his eyes moving to look at Karamatsu, only to widen and glance away almost immediately.

"I didn't think I would be affected, honestly..." Choromatsu propped himself up with his arms, lounging in the morning sun, "I thought our curse could only hit one brother at a time, but I couldn't fight against the thought of...making (y/n) mine. I'll take the blame for what happened, and I'm sorry for it, (y/n). I didn't mean for any of that to happen."

"I guess I accept the apology, but

why

did it happen?" I stepped out from Karamatsu's shadow, kneeling down to look Choromatsu in the eye. We were far enough away from the water that I wasn't too worried about being dragged back in.

"I was really happy that you came back and that you wanted to talk to me, but I was frustrated that I was kinda stuck here. After that, I just felt like you should only belong to me, no matter what, and then I lost it," He lifted a hand towards his green brain coral pins, rubbing the sides softly, "I'm sorry."

"It wasn't all right, but I forgive you. I guess we have more answers about your family curse now, and that it doesn't need to have a single target at a time," I tried to laugh, but couldn't bring myself to. I felt a hand on my shoulder, and looked up to see Karamatsu smiling down at me with his eyes closed.

"Let's get you out of that swimwear for now. I'm sure that Totoko had a kimono that you could borrow."

"Oh, I'm fine in this--" I tried to wave off his offer, but paused when I looked into Karamatsu's eyes when he opened them.

His

dark

eyes.

Chapter 17

"Who are you...?" I took a small step back, but Karamatsu's hand on my shoulder slid down to my waist as he stepped in too close for comfort, his free hand hooking a finger under my chin to force my face up towards him.

"Honestly, (y/n), I'm rather offended that you doubt me," His breath danced on my lips as he bent closer towards me, "Here I am, defending your life again, and you still don't trust me."

"Back off, Osomatsu!" I heard a rhythmic thumping down the wooden staircase before 'Karamatsu' was sent flying away from me, tumbling over and over in the sand towards the water. My heartbeat raced in my chest, the sound flooding my ears as I fought to keep down the blush that seemed to rear its head at the wrong time. I clamped my hands over my cheeks before I was gently pushed aside, seeing Karamatsu's scarred back in front of me.

"--ay, (l/n)?" I heard a voice only seconds later, piecing together that someone was asking if I was okay.

"Yeah...I'm not hurt," I replied shakily as my heart slowed to its normal rate.

"Ahahahooow, Shittymatsu! You didn't hold back this time..." I heard Osomatsu's voice laughing before it dropped into a groan.

What was happening?

"You're the one who stepped out of line, Osomatsu," Karamatsu commented, "Weren't you the one to said that you weren't interested in (l/n) anymore?"

"I don't remember saying that," I heard a crack before sand shuffled around, "I also don't remember my claim being lifted. She's still mine."

"No, I'm not," I stepped out from behind Karamatsu to see a human Osomatsu rubbing his neck, a smirk spread wide on his face as he narrowed

his eyes towards me, "If your claim is as cheap as the trinket I bought at a thrift store, then you can have it back."

"Oh? You've gotten a lot spunkier since I last saw you on that dock, practically begging me to take you right then and there," His hand dropped from his neck as his tongue slowly licked across his upper lip, "You should've just said 'yes'."

"I stand by what I said when I needed more time to think about it."

"It's been more than 24 hours. How much more time do you need?" Osomatsu leaned heavily on a leg and motioned to me with an arm, as if exasperated about the entire situation.

"I'd like another day or two before I decide! I can't exactly give up everything I've known for a spur-of-the-moment decision," I rested my left hand on my hip, holding back a tired sigh.

"Geez, why do you need so much time?!" Osomatsu rubbed his hair with both hands in frustration, "It's not like you have a family that lives with you! Just say 'yes', (y/n)."

"I'm

not

making that choice right now! I can't!" I held back tears of frustration, "You don't know what it's like to have your life suddenly upended because someone wants you all to themselves without any warning! I want to know more information and you've been less than helpful about that, only wanting sexual things in return for saving me in the first place, which I'm pretty sure was staged."

The beach was quiet, only the waves making sound against the sand. Osomatsu dropped his hands and looked towards his feet, his hair hiding his face in shadow. I flinched as he started walking towards me only to be blocked by Karamatsu's arm, keeping him a meter away from me. The eldest did nothing to move his arm out of the way, only slowly looking up

until we were staring at each other. The usual dark hues were heavily shaded with a bright red ring, staring right into my own. The pressure from the look was enough to keep me in place.

"I don't know...?" He continued to glare at me, tilting his head slightly upwards as if he was looking at disgusting garbage, "I don't know, huh? Typical human, always thinking that you're the victim of whatever happens to you..." The bright morning sun became hidden behind a thick layer of blackish-gray cloud, swallowing the entire sky in a matter of minutes as rain slowly began to fall, "Yeah, I must be in the wrong because you're completely innocent, right?"

"Osomatsu, stop--" Karamatsu tried to get Osomatsu to look at him, but the eldest's gaze was firmly locked with my own. I took a few steps back, understanding that despite being in a human form, Osomatsu was still practically a deity.

And I had pissed him off

.

"You can't be bothered to make a choice that would save whatever family you have, or the people around you," He took a step away from Karamatsu's arm and began walking towards the waves that were swelling with each crash, "I want an answer, now."

The rain swept across the sand sideways, hitting the three brothers and myself with such a force that it felt like hail. I lost track of Osomatsu when a wave crashed over him, and Karamatsu wrapped his arms around my shoulders to keep me close as another wave nearly ripped my legs from underneath me. He lifted me over his shoulder and ran towards the wooden staircase as the waterline encroached closer and closer towards Mrs. Yowai's house. I couldn't see Ichimatsu and Choromatsu, and hoped they'd be fine in this sudden storm.

"What in the hell happened, Karamatsu? I sent you down there to ease anything that would happen--" Mrs. Yowai asked as we entered the house,

her eyes narrowing at me as she tossed him a towel, "You said something, didn't you?"

"I didn't know that asking for some time would set him off like this--!"

"For someone that wants to help, you're sure doing a lot of harm."

"I--" Her words shattered my heart, "I didn't mean to--"

"Yeah, yeah...Karamatsu, did you bring your supplies from that company?" The elderly woman clicked her tongue before looking at the man next to me.

"Nearly everything, just missing a skinsuit," He tossed the towel towards me before leaving the room.

"Wha--"

"He got the gear you'd need to go on a dive, and you seem to be wearing the missing part. How lucky," Her voice sounded emotionless, "I figured something like this would happen, so now it's your job to finish it. You've gotta go find Osomatsu and calm him down from this tantrum that you've started."

"Hold on, what? Why do I have to calm him down when all of this is his fault?!" I threw the towel on the floor in defiance.

"Because it's

all your fault

, stupid child! You have had every opportunity to walk away, but you only buried your nose deeper into their business," Mrs. Yowai looked at me, her temper flaring a little, "Osomatsu is stubborn, but if you can calm him down and get him to see that you need more time, he'll understand. You've practically befriended Ichimatsu and Choromatsu already. Ask Ichimatsu for a ride when you're down there, as I need Choromatsu to keep my house safe."

"What about Kara--?" I started.

"I'll be staying here. Without my fins, I'm pretty useless underwater," Karamatsu brought in a weighted vest with two oxygen tanks, one already in place as the breather and the second tethered for a refill. Attached to the vest were the rest of the diving gear I'd need. I took a breath and went through the motions, fully sealing the dive suit before putting the vest on and tightening it into place. I lowered the full face mask into place, and gave the oxygen tank a test pull before tightening the tube into the rebreather unit. Moving towards the door, I saw that the water level had risen dramatically and was settling right at the doorway. Cinching the diving fins into place, I gave Karamatsu's hand a gentle squeeze before he helped me into the swelling water, returning my squeeze with his own.

A second later and I was fully submerged underwater, looking around and seeing where dry land once was a few moments ago. I could see Choromatsu swimming close by the house and keeping his glowing green eyes focused on the surface of the water as his hands were spread wide above his head, seemingly forcing it to stay where it was on his own. I turned towards where Osomatsu had disappeared near the shoreline, kicking my way slowly but surely towards my destination.

"Japan will be flooded by the time you get there," A gruff voice commented before I felt the vest shoulders lift up as a familiar motion of a tail lightly hit my fins, "I'll get you there faster."

"I'm sorry, Ichimatsu," I called out through the full face mask, my words punctuated by me taking in a breath, "I didn't mean for any of this to happen."

"...then fix it..." I barely heard his grumble as the water began to race past us, the seascape below speeding by.

Chapter 18

I had lost sight of the surface a long time ago, dragged along by Ichimatsu who had to pause a few times during the journey, seemingly waiting for something before picking a direction to swim in. The landscape underneath had turned from a sandy floor to a ragged bare floor, the sand no longer hiding the rocky outline of the island. I took in another slow breath as Ichimatsu shifted his grip on the vest shoulder straps, exhaling just as slowly so I didn't blow a screen of bubbles that hindered his vision.

Out of the dark depths speared a bow, nearly rotten from decades of being underwater. Ichimatsu slowed down his speed as the rest of the sailing ship was unveiled from the dark waters surrounding it.

The front hull was missing its figurehead, the piece being ripped from its place by the telltale signs of wood tearing apart. The upper deck of the ship was mostly rotted through, punctured by many holes, but the two main masts held firm while the gaff and the main boom were missing, along with a tattered mainsail and foresail. The sides of the ship were mostly intact as well, though the marine life had widened the portholes to accommodate their pathways. A glint of metal caught my eye near where the captain's quarters would be, looking to see a pile of coins and jewelry.

"Look who decided to visit!" I felt a sudden shift as Ichimatsu let go of my vest. I turned to see Osomatsu in his merman form gripping Ichimatsu by the shoulders, a wide smile on his face as if nothing had happened.

"Not voluntarily. I'm just here to bring (y/n)," Ichimatsu gritted his teeth and yanked himself away from his older brother's grasp. I noticed Osomatsu's fins flare a little despite his smile not moving.

"Ahh, all right then," Osomatsu changed his focus from his younger brother to me, "Had enough time to think about your decision?"

"Absolutely not," I kicked towards him, knowing that I was completely in his domain, "I asked for a day or two, and you sent a monsoon as an answer!"

"It's about time for one, anyway," He shrugged and swam closer, starting to circle around to my left, "Since you've come to my home, I can guess that you either have an answer, or you want to try and save everyone up there."

"How many times do I need to say it? I can't give an answer to that question right now. I'm here to try and save my home," I moved out of the way from his dorsal fins, avoiding the barb that suddenly thrust at me as he turned around.

"Eh..." He raised a finger to his chin, contemplating what I said. I knew I wasn't getting through to him.

I had to say something that he'd take seriously.

"I'll give you a kiss."

Both brothers turned towards me, one looking disgusted and the other with shock. Osomatsu shook his head from side to side, coming a little bit closer with a hand cupped around his ear.

"I'm sorry...what?"

"I'll give you a kiss if you stop this monsoon

and

give me a day to make my choice," I held his gaze as the mask released the cO2 filled air, the bubbles rising in the silence.

"(Y/n), don't--"

"Sure," Osomatsu cut off Ichimatsu's protest, "But it has to be mouth to mouth, without the mask interfering."

I clenched my fists and glanced down at my depth gauge, seeing that I was deep enough from the recreational diving depth that I had to be careful. I'd have to waste oxygen to clear the mask of water, and that meant less time for me to be underwater.

"Fine," I took a deep breath through my nose and pulled off the full face mask, feeling the cold water hit my face and rip the air upwards. Before I could motion for Osomatsu that it was okay, I felt a pair of arms bring me close and a pair of lips pressed against mine. Panic started to set in as a tongue forced its way between my lips, some of the air I needed escaping my mouth as it probed and pushed against everything it touched. It was far from a romantic kiss, with Osomatsu dominating everything about it while I fought to stay conscious and alive fifty meters under the surface. One of his arms dropped below my waist and dragged itself towards my inner thighs, my pushes and shoves going ignored.

"That's more than one kiss, Osomatsu!" I heard Ichimatsu growl before I was ripped from his intense hold, almost letting go of my breath. I quickly flooded the mask with air as I put it back on, panting as my thudding heart tried to slow down.

"Our lips didn't break contact, so it was still one kiss," Osomatsu backed away a little and gave me a smirk, "I'll do more of that if you choose me."

"I...You promised...one more day and then I'll tell you what I decide..." I was at a loss for words. I wasn't expecting that kind of reaction from my body.

For a first kiss, it wasn't

that

bad.

"That's what I said, so you'll get another twenty-four hours starting from now," Osomatsu looked towards the surface before looking at me, "I look forward to what you have to say."

"Come on..." Ichimatsu grabbed my vest before I could say anything in response, a dark look passing over his face as he turned towards his destination.

I was flung onto Mrs. Yowai's beach without ceremony, landing hard on my side. I loosened the vest and took off the mask, waving it around to force the water out that had been left in since the kiss. Looking towards the shoreline, I didn't see Ichimatsu and could only guess as to what he had been thinking about, since we were quiet for the entire trip back.

"(L/n)!" I heard Karamatsu from the house, turning to look up at him as he descended the stairs, "You convinced him to withdraw his storm!"

"Ah...yeah," I looked away as the kiss played through my mind, "He gave me another twenty-four hours to think about my decision, so I'm going to take full advantage of that."

"Well, that's good," Karamatsu patted my back with a smile on his face, "Whatever you said worked."

"She offered a kiss in trade," I heard Ichimatsu snarl from behind me, the sound of wet sand shifting around, "Idiot almost died because of it."

I looked away from Karamatsu's face as it quickly shifted from happiness to a brief look of disappointment, knowing that what I did was foolish despite the results it brought.

"Well, you're safe for now. What are you going to do with the time remaining?" Karamatsu's voice didn't change, "Still interested in removing Osomatsu's claim?"

"I'm not sure, but I know where I need to start," I looked back at him with resolve in my eyes as I shrugged off the weighted vest and air tanks, "It's time to get to know the family."

Chapter 19

The plan sounded much easier in my head -- get to know each brother and make my decision after I had met everyone. However, with two brothers fully rogue, it would be hard to figure out if I'd even be able to meet them on a fair playing field.

I tapped my pen against my bottom lip, staring at the page laying on the lap desk Mrs. Yowai let me borrow. The page had remained devoid of anything concrete, as most of what I had written down was crossed out as the morning settled into early afternoon. I could use the diving gear to meet Osomatsu and Ichimatsu out in open water, and I wouldn't need to use anything special for Karamatsu or Choromatsu, since they were essentially landlocked. Jyushimatsu and Todomatsu were the problems here.

Jyushimatsu seemed to be a curious creature, my mind recalling the night he had nearly drowned me after the bus was dragged off the cliff. He was almost child-like, pushing and prodding to see what my reactions would be to what he was doing before trying something else.

Todomatsu hadn't done anything since last night, and possibly wouldn't be able to do anything until tonight when I fell asleep. I didn't know anything about how he did it, but I guessed that it may have been because my tub was full of water. Ichimatsu did mention that I was humming, so at least one part lined up with the siren mythos.

I probably wouldn't have much luck without a sane escort to wherever Jyushimatsu lived, which meant that I'd have to turn to the red or purple merman for help. I put my pen down and looked towards Karamatsu and Mrs. Yowai sitting at the table, laughing and talking about something from their past. The only person I felt that I could really trust was Karamatsu, but with him somehow being stuck as a human, I couldn't risk him being in danger without the skills or ability to defend himself quickly.

Standing up and stretching, the paper clenched tight in my left hand, I quietly excused myself and made my way back down to the beach. The staircase hadn't suffered any damage from the sudden flooding, but the sand was still sopping wet due to the sun not having enough time to dry everything yet. The water from the monsoon had left the foliage in the area weakened, the event being called a cloudburst by meteorologists with how quickly it appeared and vanished. Thankfully, no deaths were reported despite several injuries that were related to the phenomenon, reminding me again of what Osomatsu was capable of.

Choromatsu had taken up his usual post, lazily looking behind him as I approached with my bare feet squishing into the sand. The water level had slightly risen from the rain, and I sat out of reach from Choromatsu as I motioned to the paper in my hand.

"I don't have a lot of time for this, unfortunately, but would you be willing to answer some questions?"

"It depends on the question. If I can answer it, I will," He looked back out to the open ocean, the waves lightly lapping around his tail.

"Was everyone in your family merfolk, or did something change you into this?"

"Well, isn't

that

a bad icebreaker," He laughed lightly to himself, "We were born like this. Though, I guess the more correct term was 'created', but we weren't given any kind of guidance for what we should be doing. We knew what our names were instinctually, but had to figure out everything else," Choromatsu shifted positions, moving from where he was facing and settled into a leaning position, propping himself up on an elbow while turning to look at me.

"What happened to Karamatsu? Why is he a human and not a merman like the rest of you?"

"I'm not answering that one. Ask him if you want to know," He narrowed his eyes as he turned away, almost like he was recalling a horrid memory.

"Oh...sorry..." I scanned over the paper, picking out a question that didn't look like it would offend anyone, "How long have you all been around?"

"That's a hard one. We never really kept time, nor had the need to. If I had to guess, though, we'd be nearly...three-thousand years old, probably?" He scratched his head with his free hand, "I do remember when the seas would be silent, long before humanity made their propellers and motor-driven sea vehicles."

"What are you both talking about?" I heard Karamatsu from the staircase, turning to see him approach the two of us with a smile, his light green eyes looking between Choromatsu and myself.

"Just getting what information I can before tomorrow," I raised the paper and watched as he sat down on the wet sand next to me, sandwiching himself between Choromatsu and I.

"Oh, nice. Got any questions I can answer?"

"Just one specific to you, but I don't know if it's a good one to ask," I tried to hide the question from him, covering it with my thumb as his eyes glanced over the sheet.

"If I had to guess, it's in regards to why I'm not out at sea with my brothers."

Choromatsu and I remained silent, and I hung my head a little.

"I don't mind answering that one," Karamatsu flipped out a pair of sunglasses, sliding them on as the sun broke through the light cloud cover, "You remember what I said after the coral reef? That I had made mistakes and paid for them in full?"

"Yeah, I do."

"I became close to a marine biologist a long time ago, tried befriending her while she was studying the Great Barrier Reef with her team. The

relationship was pleasant, and I'd show her what I was doing in regards to helping the reef survive the warm summer waters. We'd even go swimming together, and I'd calm the sharks around us enough to where she'd be able to swim alongside them without stirring up the waters. She loved it, and I loved her.

"Some higher up found out about me through her data entries, the numbers being much more accurate than their instruments could give at the time, and she was used by a scientific study company to bring me out of hiding. I was captured and stolen from the ocean, labeled as a mutant fish, and shipped off to somewhere in Europe. I never saw that marine biologist again, and was kept in an aquarium that was too small for me. The water was hard to breathe in, and I was fed small meals until they figured out that I needed meat.

"When I wasn't suffocating in the cage they had me in, I was forced to transition to breathing air while laying on a table. Normally, the process doesn't hurt and is something we're able to do easily, but when a merman has oxygen-deprived gills and is exposed to oxygen-rich air, it's like someone being released from suffocation over and over again. I don't know what they did to me, but they were mainly interested in how my tail was attached. Was it fused? Was I a living hoax? How did my insides look if I was part mammal and part fish?

"I made a deal with Osomatsu through Todomatsu. I told him that I wanted out, no matter what price I'd have to pay. He warned me that if he agreed, I wouldn't be able to return to the waters like before. After the scientists had discovered that my blood had healing properties, I didn't want to become a living blood bank for them to use...so I agreed to his terms, and he sent the rain.

"He sent enough that the nearby dams flooded and hit where I was being held. The laboratory was completely washed out, and I was carried somewhere by the rough currents. When I was washed ashore, I realized that my tail was gone and I now had a pair of human legs," He rubbed his knees, as if accentuating his statement, "I lost contact with Osomatsu afterwards. He may be a tyrant of an older brother, but I owe him a lot."

"Oh, Karamatsu..." I released a breath I didn't realize I was holding, "I'm sorry that happened to you..."

"It was bound to happen sooner or later. He wouldn't stop trying to hit on several women," Choromatsu scoffed behind me.

"It's kinda done and dusted, so I've been coping with it my own way," Karamatsu laughed, his eyes hidden by the dark sunglasses.

"I'm sure that you had a wonderful tail," I commented before realizing what I said.

"Ahaha! I sure did! Too bad that I didn't let her take pictures of me. Do you know what a double swordtail guppy looks like?" He turned his face to me with his right eyebrow raised.

"Yeah, I do," I remember the distinct tail, the top and bottom almost three times the size of the tail itself.

"Mine was very similar. The pectoral and pelvic fins were of similar shape, but my main fin rivaled Ichimatsu's in length," Karamatsu smiled as he looked back at the ocean, as if he was expecting Ichimatsu to be there.

"I can imagine it, and it does seem beautiful," I nod a little, "I'm kinda surprised that, despite being brothers, each of you have very different tails."

"We thought it had something to do with our abilities at first," Choromatsu piped up, "But then we just got used to it."

"Your tail was always longer than mine, but Osomatsu fought with Todomatsu over who had the more extravagant tail."

We all looked towards the new voice, seeing Ichimatsu barely poking his head out of the water by the rocks. Karamatsu laughed and Choromatsu gave a hearty huff, as if recalling memories.

"Those two would always get into a fight, but I thought that Todomatsu was always the one riling Osomatsu up. Ever since he discovered a shattered

mirror in a wreck, he's always been proud of how he looks," Choromatsu commented.

"I think that each of your tails speaks to your personality, too..." I quietly voiced my thoughts, remembering the brashness of Osomatsu and the sulking demeanor of Ichimatsu, each reflective of their tail somewhat.

"It's possible," I heard Karamatsu respond just as quietly, as if not wanting to interrupt my thoughts.

"Are you dolts wanting food or not?!" Totoko's yell resounded from the house, startling everyone on the beach.

"We don't want to get hungry while on your journey of information gathering, do we?" Karamatsu lightly groaned as he stood up, offering a hand to help me.

"Definitely not," I smiled as I took his hand, looking back to the other two brothers, "I'll be back to ask more questions."

"Sure, we'll be here," Choromatsu waved as we walked towards the house.

Author's Note

In regards to the 'Choice Poll Final!!', I'm not going to close it until I've completed the ending.

I've thought it over, and would like everyone's input on the ending order. Even the new people that stumble upon my story.

I really enjoyed writing this story, despite the low read count compared to my Mafia!Matsu story, and I hope you've enjoyed reading it, too!

Chapter 20

The lunch that was prepared was a simple one, a make-your-own sandwich buffet on the kitchen counter. I pieced together what I could from the meat spread Mrs. Yowai had, tossing some preferred greens and condiments on before biting into it. While eating my sandwich quietly at the table, my mind raced with questions I could ask the brothers.

More personal ones.

My eyes drifted towards the open door that led to the private beach, imagining what kind of questions I'd ask either of the two mermen down there.

Would Choromatsu be more happy not being relegated to guard duty in case Osomatsu has a tantrum? Why were the brothers focused on keeping Mrs. Yowai safe? Was it because of Osomatsu's claim on her from her youth? Did they need to keep her safe

because

she discarded the red coral long ago?

What about Ichimatsu? I know that Karamatsu said that he tended to become violent towards his brothers when he became jealous, but what would happen if I chose him?

I paused while chewing the last bite of my sandwich.

If I chose a merman brother, would I be forced to turn into a mermaid? Did they

all

have the ability to do that?

My throat suddenly ran dry as I tried to swallow what was in my mouth, gulping down the remaining drink in the glass in front of me.

I had never thought of that, despite it being a very real possibility. I guess it could depend on who I ended up being claimed by, but Karamatsu's description of it didn't make the process sound like some fairy tale transformation with bright lights and loud cheerful orchestral music. I would be changed from one species into another, and would have to adapt to that new life.

It didn't matter if I was ready or not. Depending on which brother I was claimed by, I could possibly ask them for time to settle matters on land.

Unless I chose Osomatsu. He made it very clear that he wanted me with him as soon as I said his name.

"(L/n), are you all right?" Karamatsu's voice cut through my thoughts. I looked from the door towards him, realizing that both Mrs. Yowai and he were looking at me in worry.

"Ah...yeah. I was busy thinking."

"Is there anything else you wanted to ask me or Totoko?" He shifted in his kneeling position to face me fully, "I know that you're on a tense deadline, and I want to help you as much as I can."

"If I choose a brother, other than you, would I have to become a mermaid?" The question rolled off my tongue before I could think.

"That depends on who you choose to be claimed by. Someone may like you being a human, and another may like you as a mermaid."

"Does there have to be someone guarding Mrs. Yowai?"

"The--"

"Absolutely not!" Mrs. Yowai cut off Karamatsu, practically slamming her cup down on the table and causing the two of us to jump in surprise, "I don't want these idiots around me 24-7, nor did I ask for it."

"We stayed around here because we didn't know what Osomatsu would do when you threw away his coral," Karamatsu looked over to her, an eyebrow raised as his lips twitched into a nervous smile.

"Oh, so you're putting all of this on me?" She narrowed her eyes and glared harshly at Karamatsu, the former merman waving his hands by his face as he leaned away.

"Not at all, Totoko!" His voice shook, "You're important to every one of us, and we didn't want something to happen to you by accident."

"I am a fisherman's daughter and an idol in my prime. I should've married an oil tycoon while I was still young!" The old woman grumbled as she stood up, shuffling to the kitchen and putting the food away, "I'm not so old that I can't whip each of you idiots into shape!"

Karamatsu scrambled to get up and clear the table, following Mrs. Yowai's lead into the kitchen as I was left alone in the room. I heard their voices talking to each other, but didn't bother to listen in, knowing that it was probably more banter from their younger years that I wouldn't understand. Though, the outburst did open up the dynamic of Mrs. Yowai's relationship with the brothers. It was that of possibly unrequited love, but more than likely, Mrs. Yowai still loved the attention she was receiving from the brothers, keeping up a wall to push them away just to watch them scramble back to her.

I smiled to myself before leaving for the private beach once again, the sand starting to dry under the powerful noon sun. The lagoon-style beach was calm from the winds, the breakwaters effective in their placement and leaving the clear waters undisturbed. Ichimatsu and Choromatsu were still in their respective places from when I left a little while ago, both seemingly in their own worlds.

"Choromatsu," I called out softly, not wanting to surprise the skittish merman, "I have one more question for you."

Recovering from the small startle I gave him despite my quiet voice, he turned towards me, "Oh, yeah?"

"If I let you claim me, would you be free from this place?" I heard Ichimatsu flinch, the water rippling out from his position. Choromatsu looked at me with wide eyes, his mouth open in shock.

"I...uh...I mean--" He struggled to find the words, his hands reaching up to his face as if wanting to hide away from the world, "I would like to travel the oceans again...but Totoko--" His eyes moved past me towards the house behind me, his mind obviously not ready for the question I asked.

"I didn't mean for it to throw you off this much..." I knelt in the sand, still far enough away from his reach and the water's edge, "I just spoke with Mrs. Yowai, and what she said cleared some things up."

"Mmm," Choromatsu slowly recovered from his flustered state, humming to himself before looking back to the open ocean, "If I had the opportunity, then I would go and see what's changed. Take in the sights, you know?"

I smiled a little at him, seeing the desire in his eyes as he gazed at the waters.

"Why are you trying to help us?" I heard Ichimatsu mutter softly over by the breakwater, glancing over to see him looking right at me.

"Because I want to," I held his gaze as I turned towards him, "I know I could just walk away, but I feel like that wouldn't be fair to your family."

"So? We don't care about you."

"Really? Then why did you try to kill me twice within the last week?"

I watched as his eyes widened before he broke eye contact, looking at anything else other than me, "...I don't need to answer you. It's not like you're going to get to know me well enough by tomorrow to take my coral."

"I'd like to start by knowing something about you, rather than being told about you by someone else."

"I'm not worth it," He muttered as his mouth slipped underwater.

"I think you are," I offered, "You've had more chances to kill me than anyone else after I rescued you, but you didn't."

"That's because it wasn't a good opportunity."

"It was more than enough. You

just

had complete control over my breathing tanks while bringing me to Osomatsu," I stood up and moved towards Ichimatsu, his form still attempting to retreat into the water, "So why didn't you?"

"I..." His cheeks flushed with red, spreading across his nose, "Osomatsu would've killed me if you arrived dead."

"Then how about in my apartment?"

"You were in her

apartment

?" Choromatsu choked out, but his words went unheard by Ichimatsu.

"That was different...!"

I took in a slow breath, recognizing the signs when someone didn't want to talk. I lowered my voice, "I'm sorry that I can't save everyone from Osomatsu, but I still want to try--"

His dark eyes widened and looked up at me in shock, as if remembering what happened in my bathroom. A flash of purple circled his eyes before he narrowed them and turned away completely, his bare teeth set into a snarl and his tail shifting around to agitate the sand underneath him. I thought about taking a step away, realizing what was going on, but something kept me still.

"(Y/n)..." I heard Choromatsu call out my name in warning.

"One of us

will

kill you," Ichimatsu barely looked back at me, as if expecting to see me flinch away.

"That's okay," I met his eyes with my own steady gaze, "I'd rather die by someone's hands then suffer alone in the waters I love."

The purple merman turned a little more towards me, allowing me to catch a slight sneer on his lips.

"Do either of you know where Jyushimatsu or Todomatsu are?" I turned my body to face both brothers, allowing either of them to answer.

"(Y/n), you can't be serious!" Choromatsu recoiled in shock as Ichimatsu stared at me with wide eyes, the purple ring no longer present.

"Yeah, I know where they are," A condescending voice called out from above me, near the top of the breakwater barrier.

"Osomatsu," I turned around to face the oldest, swallowing a frustrated scream and trying to keep a neutral look on my face.

The red merman had donned his human form again, sitting on the breakwater with an arm draped over his left knee as he leaned on his right arm. The only clothing he wore was a bright red pair of swim trunks, leaving his human legs exposed. I couldn't help but look at the leg sleeve tattoo that caught my eye, the pattern very similar to the scales of his tail.

"Like what you see?"

I met his eyes, a slight flush to my face caused by embarrassment, "Where are your two younger brothers?"

"I can take you there for a small payment," Osomatsu closed his eyes slightly, the permanent smirk on his face.

"You've already made her wager with you," Ichimatsu growled, a hand on one of the rocks as if trying to climb up the breakwater. The oldest quickly shifted his eyes from me to the purple merman, glaring at his younger brother. I noticed a change in attitude in Ichimatsu as the oldest stared down at him, becoming more passive as time went on.

"What did you want from me, Osomatsu?" I took a step forward to pull the attention back onto me.

"Nothing for now, but I'll cash it when you choose me," Osomatsu gave a wide smile, as if he was confident that he already knew what I was going to do, "Put your flimsy gear on, and I'll take you to both of them."

"What?" Ichimatsu, Choromatsu, and I asked at the same time.

"You were thinking of getting to Jyushimatsu and Todomatsu to see if you'd choose them, right?" Osomatsu raised an eyebrow, "Why shouldn't I take you? I'm the strongest here, and it's in my best interest to keep you safe."

My mind paused in thought, wondering if he was turning around from his possessive personality.

"My claim on you is still active, after all."

There it is

, I partially rolled my eyes as a sigh escaped my lips.

Despite his apparent arrogance, Osomatsu did have a point. I thought over what I had available to me and realized that I was missing an important piece of the diving set.

"Fine, but I need you to take me to my apartment first. There are two things I want to get," I started walking towards the house with the intention of packing up the air tanks.

"Which are?" Osomatsu called out after me, making his way down from the breakwater.

"Fresh air for the tanks and my knife."

Chapter 21

The tapping noise persisted as I closed the valve on the oxygen tank, reading the gauge and slinging the tank into a carrier on my personal dive vest. Having returned the borrowed gear from this morning to my workplace, I refilled the tanks and my own personal ones as I swapped out the borrowed gear with mine. There were a few co-workers that asked if I was all right, and I had answered as honestly as I could with 'physically fine'. The tapping noise started to grind against my nerves, turning my head towards the source.

Osomatsu was leaning against the door jam with an arm propped up, his fingers tapping against the wood. He didn't look too comfortable, but I had told him to wait outside if he didn't like being around people. A few others did look at his leg scale tattoo in curiosity, but his glare turned them away without a word.

"You said that you needed me to take you home," He complained for the fifth time on this trip, "Last I checked, you didn't live here."

"It has the supplies I need, and a lot of my deep diving gear is stored here," I gave him the same answer as before.

I heard him click his tongue before standing up and hauling everything I could carry out to the docks. He followed me out without a word, seemingly watching my every move. As I lay everything in order, I realized that my knife was still in my apartment.

"Shoot...Care to wait here for another ten minutes? I need to run to my apartment," I started to strip off the skin suit, revealing my swimsuit underneath.

"Why can't you just wear that? It's better looking than that rubber suit..." Osomatsu huffed as he sat next to my gear, looking at my body as I pulled the skinsuit off.

"Temperature is a silent killer, and I'd like to

survive

the cold, deep waters before making my choice," Shaking out the droplets still stubborn enough to cling to the inside of the suit, I lay it flat on the dock, "I promise I'll be back quickly. Just try not to cause trouble for the people here."

"Make sure to run all the way back here," He drawled with a smirk on his face.

"And here I thought you were an ass kind of guy," I threw a smile towards him, seeing a satisfactory shocked look on Osomatsu's face before I turned away, jogging all the way to my apartment. Unlocking the door and taking note of everything still in its place, I grabbed my diving knife from the mesh bag in the bathroom before a glint of red caught my eye.

The red coral.

It was sitting where I last left it, untouched on the counter. The cord remained broken from when I pulled it off my neck. I grabbed the glass vial and tucked it between my breasts, knowing that it wasn't a very secure place but it would do for now.

"You took

forever

! I thought I was gonna bake out here!" Osomatsu whined as I recovered from the jog back, too out of breath to send him a glare.

"Just...hush...your job is to take me to both...Jyushimatsu and Todomatsu."

I looked at him as his silence dragged on, noticing his eyes were locked onto my breasts. Raising an arm over my chest, I narrowed my eyes in his direction.

"Hey!"

"You've got it on you again," I felt his fingers suddenly brush against my cheek, making me realize that he had moved a lot closer than I realized, "Is it merely a precaution, or are you hinting at something?"

"It's just to make sure that I have it with me when I decide," I jerked my head out of his hand, climbing into the dry skinsuit and zipping it up all the way before attaching my diving gear. With everything snug against my body, I clamped the knife and its sheath onto the weighted belt and tilted over the edge of the dock, my air tanks crashing against the water and my body quickly submerging with the momentum. Taking in a breath, I looked up through my goggles to see a smiling Osomatsu dive right after me.

"You can deny it all you want. I know you're gonna choose me," His voice cut through the water like it was air, and I watched in amazement as the skin on his legs peeled off like glittering scales, disappearing after leaving his body. The bipedal legs soon swelled into the long lionfish-like tail I had first seen, the white and red scales nearly dazzling in the scattered sunlight. He moved closer and lightly grabbed the back of my vest, dragging me along as he swam away from the docks.

"First up is Jyushimatsu," I felt his tail rub against my legs before looking to see that Osomatsu had moved all of his venomous fins away from my body, creating a protective umbrella or sorts around my lower body. The rocky ground underneath us gave way to smooth sand as he picked up speed, and I realized that this was also my chance to learn more about Osomatsu.

"If you don't mind me asking, why did you help Karamatsu escape from that lab?"

"He may be intolerable at times, but he's still my brother. Older siblings are supposed to help their younger family," I couldn't see Osomatsu's face from the angle I was at, but I heard the bit of pride in his voice.

"How did you determine that you're the oldest?"

"I was created first. That's usually how it goes," His hands shifted from gripping the back of my vest to slipping into the armholes, almost holding me like I was on a clothesline. The change of grip was surprisingly more supportive, "What about you? Do you have any siblings?"

"Ah...mayhaps," I didn't want to really tell Osomatsu anything. I wanted to keep my family safe by keeping them out of my business, as much as I didn't want to hurt them.

"What about hobbies? Got any that you'll miss?"

"I thought I was supposed to get to know you guys, not the other way around?" I laughed a little bit, "I have one hobby that I'd be able to do, and that's dive. Maybe I'd be able to go a lot deeper than I have previously."

There was no response, only the sound of the passing water making any kind of noise. The silence from him dragged on before I felt his arms on my back tighten up.

"I'm sorry that I've been an asshole since we met."

"Wha--?"

"The truth is -- I'm hoping that you don't choose me. My brothers need more help from a woman like you than I do," Osomatsu laughed a little and I couldn't tell if it was forced or natural, "I'm beyond help or redemption. I had originally started this as a game because I was bored, teasing you to see if you'd stay or run away like the rest. When you stood your ground, I realized that you could do some good for us."

I was left speechless.

The merman that had been sexually harassing me since day one...didn't want to be chosen because he thought his brothers deserved me more? The sudden change of attitude threw me for a loop.

Was this another trick to get under my skin, to get me to sympathize with him?

"When you meet Jyushimatsu and Todomatsu, don't be afraid of them," His voice changed from a soft spoken whisper to an authoritative tone, "Treat them like you've treated us, and you

should

be fine."

"'Should'?" I tried to look up at him, but the back of my head pressed against his chest, stopping me from looking up further. I hadn't noticed that we had descended towards a rocky outcropping, the crust of the earth splintering upwards as if they were teeth of an enormous monster. Scattered among the jagged rocks were white bones, completely stripped of flesh and scattered everywhere.

"If it gets too much for you, I can take care of the problem," I felt Osomatsu remove his arms from underneath my vest, letting go of me and swimming overhead before I was practically tackled by a yellow blur.

"You're back, you're back!" I didn't feel any teeth piercing my skin, quickly looking down to see yellow bioluminescent-covered arms wrapped around my waist awkwardly, trying to hug me as tightly as they could while maneuvering around my gear. A head rubbed against my shoulder, like a pet trying to rub their scent on their owner after they came home.

"J-Jyushimatsu...! Hi there," I tried to keep the nervousness out of my voice, fighting down memories of the last time, seeing the same giddy smile turn up towards me.

"Big brother promised that I could play with you for a long time," Rows of sharp teeth flashed in another wide grin, his glowing yellow eyes locked onto mine. He was clearly in a rogue state, and I still had no idea how to interact with him.

"Really? What kind of games did you want to play?" I gave a quick glance around and noticed that Osomatsu had sprawled out on a nearby outcropping ledge, seemingly watching the interaction.

"Let's play 'catch the prey'! We played that before, remember? Before you cheated and used big brother to end the game," Jyushimatsu had released his hold on my waist, leaving me to free float as he swam around me.

"I'm not very fast, so I don't think it'll be much fun for you," I paused to take in a breath, "How about we play...a thinking game?"

"What kind of thinking game?" He slowed down in front of me, his yellow eyes making contact with my own.

"Maybe a question game? Have you heard of '20 Questions'?"

"No. How do you play?" I heard the interest pick up in his voice, so I began explaining the game, detailing the rules and what the goal of the game was. We went through a practice game with me giving him a simple item to ask about, and found that he picked it up pretty quickly. A few more rounds went by and Jyushimatsu became more calm, similar to a child coming down from their hyperactive state.

Noticing that he was more calm, I took the initiative after the game was finished.

"Jyushimatsu, how long have you been down here?"

"A long time," The tone of his voice didn't have the usual playfulness to it, "I live here because I know I hurt people."

"I'm sure that your brothers miss you."

"Ichimatsu visits me sometimes. We fight a lot, though," He dove down towards a rock shelf, almost laying on it.

"When you don't fight him, is it a good visit?" I followed him down, keeping my distance as the markings were still present on his skin.

"I think so. I just wish that everyone else visited me, and weren't so scared."

"Have you heard about what's going on with me?"

He shook his head.

"I...uh...I became involved with your brothers because I wanted to help, and I have a decision to make tomorrow morning," I put my hand to my chest, feeling the vial still secure under my swimsuit.

"That has nothing to do with me," Jyushimatsu looked at me, his teeth clenched in a near scowl.

"It does. I want to try and get to know everyone...so I could possibly remove Osomatsu's claim to accept someone else's," I stumbled in my thoughts, trying to figure out how to explain the situation, "I could choose your claim, if I get to know you more..."

That didn't sound right,

I looked away and tried to think of other ways to say it.

"I...think I'd like that," My eyes caught a brief moment of dark in his irises, quickly switching back to their usual yellow.

There could still be a chance for him!

I still had plenty of air in my tanks, but I noticed that the sunlight that was barely visible at the current depth was quickly disappearing. It must be close to evening.

I started to move towards Osomatsu to ask to be taken to the surface, but a sharp tug on my hand dragged me back towards Jyushimatsu, his arms once again wrapping around my waist. I glanced behind me and nearly froze.

"Jyushi--?"

"...Don't leave me..."

"I have to go back, but I'll be at Mrs. Yowai's house tomorrow morn--" I was cut off by a sudden cold hitting my face, the breathing mask pulled off before I could take a breath. I opened my eyes and saw a blurry pair of yellow eyes looking up at me.

I caught a yell in my throat, my vision focusing on the looming shark merman now hovering over me.

"You can get to know me right now. Just breathe in," I felt his hands trying to remove my vest, frantically fighting to keep the weighted garment on me. Panic filled my senses as the rogue merman began to claw at my hands, his strength overwhelming my arms and ripping open the front of my skinsuit and vest, exposing my torso to the near-frigid waters. I held onto the vest as it started to slide down my shoulders, holding my lifeline of oxygen with everything I could muster, as Jyushimatsu began to lose himself again to the rogue curse.

"You have lungs like me, just breathe...!" His voice began to screech, his taloned hand grabbing my throat tightly. My free hand blindly found the breathing mask as I felt the talons drag across my neck, hearing an animalistic screech cry out in shock. I pulled the mouthpiece up and sucked in a deep breath, almost coughing as my lungs expanded nearly past their limit.

"I had warned you, Jyushimatsu--!" Osomatsu called out, fighting with his younger brother in a violent match. Clenching the mouthpiece tightly between my teeth, I brought the vest up over my shoulders and found that the zipper had been destroyed by Jyushimatsu. I could only watch as both brothers fought, slowly kicking away from the writhing mass of red and yellow.

"You said I could play with her for a long time!" Jyushimatsu clawed at Osomatsu, his talons raking across his brother's face and slicing the skin open. Osomatsu reeled back partially before grabbing Jyushimatsu's wrists and driving him down into the rock face, his tail taking wide strokes to pin him down by force.

"It's been a long time," Osomatsu's voice darkened, "You cannot kill her. She's still mine!"

"She told me that I could claim her!" I heard Jyushimatsu whine, "She said so!"

"I heard what she said, and that only happens tomorrow. Not everything can be yours, Jyushimatsu. Just because you started this curse on our family doesn't mean we all want to join you!"

I stopped moving, stunned by the words Osomatsu growled out.

"I made us better! I brought us back to how we were!"

"Ooh, the family is fighting again," A new voice whispered in my ear, causing me to turn in surprise. The pink coral pinning the black locks of hair sent chills down my spine, my eyes meeting with fluorescent pink irises against black sclera, "My older brothers can never really get along, can they?"

Chapter 22

Todo--

"

Todomatsu!!

" Osomatsu yelled, the volume echoing in my ears. The anger in his voice seemed to raise the temperature of the water a little, the heat rolling off of the oldest brother like a rising tide.

"Don't get too mad, big brother," Todomatsu cautiously draped an arm across my shoulders as I was forced to turn and face the oldest merman, "Not all of us can tolerate what you're able to do."

Osomatsu stilled, letting go of the grip he had on Jyushimatsu and tilting his head downwards, his hair casting a shadow over his eyes. Letting out a small hum of satisfaction as the water cooled, Todomatsu gave my head a little pat like I was nothing more than a small animal. He took my mask from my mouth, timing it with an inhale, and I had to hold my breath as he blew into the facemask. No air escaped his lips, but the water inside the goggles and breathing apparatus were pushed aside, an air bubble forming in its absence.

"Don't want you to drown today," Todomatsu smiled with hooded eyes as he pushed the mask back on, the air bubble pushing the water out of my face and creating a perfect seal on the mask, as if it had never been pushed off in the first place.

"What's your aim, Totty?" Osomatsu slowly moved towards us, his face still hidden, "I know you well enough to realize that you want something out of this--"

"Oh, how could you think that? I don't want anything at all from you," Todomatsu sounded offended, a hand waving in front of his face as if

shocked. His other hand tightened on my right shoulder, my left side pinned against the pink merman, "I was only interested in taking (y/n)."

"'Taking'?" Osomatsu tilted his head upwards, revealing his eyes to be flooded with a bioluminescent red glow, "You mean kidnap. Just like you did all those years ago? Just like you tried with Totoko?"

It suddenly clicked why Osomatsu forced his claim on Mrs. Yowai when she was younger. Todomatsu was probably still just as dangerous when he wasn't rogue. The chilling folk tales of sirens singing their victims to their deaths and eating their corpses bubbled to my mind's surface.

How much of it originated from Todomatsu?

"Oh, please...I asked her if she wanted to join me for a swim, and she agreed. You were the one that intruded in the middle of that date," Todomatsu's arm snaked its way across my neck, with him moving directly behind me, "I know that (y/n) still has your coral, but like she was saying to Jyushimatsu, she needs to get to know

everyone

before making her choice..."

The silence from Osomatsu grew until he locked eyes with me, the red still swirling about in his dark hues, "How much do you have left?"

"Uh--" I fumbled to reach the oxygen gauge, pulling it up to see that my tanks were half-empty, "Enough for another thirty minutes before I need to head back to shore, but

this

is a more pressing matter--" I motioned towards the torn-open skinsuit, a little blood wafting in the current stirred by my hand. Osomatsu's eyes widened and lost the glow as he swam closer, his hands reaching out to touch the shredded fabric before wincing away, his hand grabbing my arm.

"I'll take you back," He calmly stated. Todomatsu quickly darted out in front of us, a frown on his face.

"She'll be fine, big brother," I felt something wash over my head, like a sudden heaviness that only affected my brain, "Just warm the water around her, and we can talk."

"Yeah--" I found myself speaking without permission, "I'll be fine, Osomatsu."

I internally screamed and fought against whatever was happening to me, trying to wrench control free. Todomatsu was humming very softly, the sound driving some need in me to be near him.

"You yourself had told me that the temperature could kill you faster than my brothers," Osomatsu turned to me, his eyes narrowed as he looked over my face, "...I'm taking you back."

"Wait...!" Todomatsu reached out to me as Osomatsu swam over him, my own hand trying to find his. Todomatsu's face twisted from a gentleman looking slightly sad to a monster that had his food stolen from him, his lips curling into a vicious sneer as I was pulled away. The look shattered whatever was holding me under, and I moved to grip onto Osomatsu's arm, trying to calm down the panic fighting to steal my air supply away.

I took a deep breath as my head broke the water's surface, the motion sending some bath water spilling over the edge of the tub. I winced as I stretched out from my fetal position, stretching out every limb and muscle in the warm water. My right hand slightly touched the four long scratches across my abdomen, the cuts not deep but still painful. I had refused Osomatsu's attempt at healing my cuts, his tongue licking his lips like I was a dessert to savor. I kept denying his offer until I closed my bathroom door in his face, locking it for good measure.

Tomorrow....

Waving the water laden with epson salt over my newest wound, I distracted myself by remembering the deadline I had managed to grab from the red merman this morning, and thought back to all the details I was able to find out about each brother.

Osomatsu was the eldest, and seemed to have more of a mindset to keep his brothers safe. He had told me to choose someone other than himself, unless it was a ploy to have me pick him.

Karamatsu was the second eldest, the cursed merman-turned-human by Osomatsu in a plan to escape from some kind of lab in Europe. He and Osomatsu were the only ones that hadn't tried to kill me since meeting the sextuplets.

Choromatsu was the third eldest, and seemingly the most level-headed of them. However, with the job of keeping Yowai Totoko safe from Osomatsu's tantrums, he's forced to stay in one place until she dies.

Ichimatsu was the third youngest, and possibly the most dangerous and confusing brother I've met. Impulsive yet antisocial, he seemed relieved that I had removed Osomatsu's claim from my body. He was also the one that could possibly turn fully rogue next.

Jysuhimatsu was the second youngest...and that's

all

I could think of. I was hoping to get more information from him, and was certainly surprised when he showed signs of being sane when talked to like a normal person. He was supposedly the cause of the curse, voluntarily bringing his family into a rogue state...because they had somehow changed in a way he didn't like?

Todomatsu was the youngest brother, and possibly the one I needed to be wary of the most. Where Ichimatsu and Jyushimatsu had harmed me physically...Todomatsu could manipulate me to do whatever he wanted.

I took a deep breath and slowly let it out, climbing out of the tub and draining it before a thought entered my head. If Todomatsu could interact with me while my tub was full -- what about only a few centimeters of water? I plugged the tub before it drained fully, leaving a small layer of water to where I wouldn't accidentally drown, even if I shoved my face into the water.

Moving towards the mirror over the sink by the laundry machine, I gazed at my own naked body, the once untouched skin marred by scratches and bites given to me by the merman brothers. Putting some antibacterial cream on the fresh scratches, I taped some gauze over my abdomen, the white fabric covering a twenty-by-fifteen centimeter patch of skin. Gently pulling a shirt over the gauze, I dressed myself for bed, unlocking the door and opening it to see Osomatsu lounging on the loveseat.

"If you're going to stay the night, at least take this," I tossed a folded blanket from my bed to him, "I tend to keep the temperature on the cool side."

He caught the blanket without turning around, bringing it over his body as he used the momentum to unfold its length. I paused at the movement, caught off-guard by his sudden standoffishness.

"Did I--?"

"Yeah," His quick response cut off my question, "What else would I be thinking about other than tomorrow morning? I'm staying here because I don't know what Todomatsu or Jyushimatsu have planned. You're still mine...

for now

..."

The last words sent a chill down my spine, and I couldn't figure out if it was from fear or something else. I looked away before tucking myself underneath my bed sheets, laying on my back to prevent the treated scratches from healing in an awkward position.

"Did you...really want me to choose another brother...?" The question slipped from my lips as soon as I thought of it, making me bite my bottom lip in frustration towards myself.

"Of course not," He laughed through his response before continuing in an even tone, "You put my coral on, so you're mine by rights...but if you choose someone and are able to help them, then why wouldn't I jump at that opportunity?"

I looked over towards the kitchen counter where I had placed the glass vial, seeing the coral glow softly as if responding to Osomatsu's presence.

"Would it hurt you to lose your claim?"

"It's just coral. It's not attached to us in any special way," Osomatsu moved around on the loveseat, "The few things special about it are that only a certain brother can hear it, and the others can't touch it directly. It's like holding a burning coal, and the feeling never goes away as long as skin contact remains."

"It's that painful, huh--?" My voice quieted as I felt the comfortable pull of sleep start to lull my mind into unconsciousness. I heard Osomatsu respond, but couldn't hear the words as my ears began to ring with some kind of high pitched tune. My body felt like it was floating in water, the surrounding liquid warm and inviting.

I opened my eyes to see myself floating in crystal clear waters, my bed clothes hovering about my body as if affected by physics that I couldn't feel. I took a mouthful of water to test a thought, the liquid only feeling like air as it passed between my teeth. There was no merman in sight as I righted myself to stand upon the sandy bottom, feeling the grains rub between my bare toes.

"So, that's what you did--" An angry voice snarled out from behind me, two cold hands curling themselves around my shoulders as the warmth from the water disappeared in a near-winter chill. I gasped instinctively, feeling the cold penetrating my skin where I was being touched.

"If you're talking about the tub, I did it to make sure

you

didn't try to kill me again," I fought to keep my teeth from chattering, "It seems that I made the right call."

"You think you're so smart for a human," Todomatsu's face leaned into my vision, a coy smile on his lips as his eyes glared at me, "I don't need the water to kill you."

"Certainly not, but why don't you wait until tomorrow? If I choose you to claim me, then there's not going to be anyone in the way of stopping you, right?"

"Hanging your death on a string for me?"

"Consider it a payment for answering the questions that you couldn't answer earlier," I looked directly into his pink irises, "You know who's lying nearby. You shouldn't kill me just yet."

"You let him come home with you for that reason, didn't you?" Todomatsu swam out in front of me, an eyebrow raised in question as the cold water warmed up.

"Why would I push him away while I still have his claim?" I tilted my head towards the side, slightly looking down my nose at the pink merman. The coy smile dropped before a partial grin replaced it.

"You cheeky little human," He laughed to himself for a short burst before looking at me again, "All right. I'll play with the hand you've given me.You seem to be the curious type, so why don't you ask a question first."

I could only stare at the youngest brother while he waited for me to say something.

"Copper for your thoughts?" I jerked back as I felt a cold finger trail down the side of my face, snapping me out of my thoughts as I looked at the pink merman in front of me, his pink eyes locked onto mine.

"Do you know why Jyushimatsu started this curse on your family?"

The shocked look on Todomatsu's face was near priceless, his eyes lowering as he brought a hand up to his chin, "He considered the way we were, or currently are for some of us, to be an embarrassment. He had always voiced his opinion on that, but I don't know how he did it. I am glad that it happened, though. I feel like I'm in the springtime of my youth!"

"Are you immortal?"

"We can't die from natural causes, such as disease or age. We can still suffer from artificial wounds, like a propeller from a boat or a harpoon," His wide fins spread themselves out, "Thinking of doing some damage?"

"No...not really," I looked away, "I don't think I have it in me to kill."

"Yet, you tried to hurt Ichimatsu and Jyushimatsu."

"They were trying to kill me first!" I glared at Todomatsu, seeing the merman wear a nonchalant face, "I wasn't aiming to kill them -- I just wanted to get away."

"You're such an interesting character..." Todomatsu swam closer to me, our noses almost touching, "I wonder--"

His lips touched mine before I realized what was happening, my shock muffled by his tongue playing with mine. I tried to push him away, but he held me close as his arms wrapped behind my back with a hand cradling my head, tilting it in such a way that allowed him to deepen the kiss. I bit down on his tongue, expecting him to pull back in pain. Instead, he hummed as I tasted iron in my mouth.

"All right--" He began to kiss me more fiercely, sucking on my lips and biting them, not hard enough to draw blood but enough to make them swell up. He somehow pulled my tongue into his own mouth and gently bit down on mine, the pain not severe but uncomfortable enough to remind me that I couldn't pull away without risking losing it. As I cried out in protest, he

released it and clamped onto the crook of my neck, sucking and biting on the sensitive skin between my shoulder and neck.

"Ah--! Stop!" I pushed him away, feeling my lips and tongue start to numb up from the sudden attention they received.

"Is that all you wanted?" He tilted his head in playful confusion.

"I didn't want

any

of that!"

"Are you sure?" Todomatsu smiled and spoke softly, "I only followed what your body wanted. The signals were loud and clear."

I found myself reaching out to him, a feeling of want washing over me as he held me close to him.

No...! Stop!

Osomatsu!!

Author's Note: Brother Tally

As of December 16, 2019, the tally for which brother you guys want to go with is:

Karamatsu, with 3 votes

Jyushimatsu, with 2 votes

Osomatsu, Choromatsu, Ichimatsu, and Todomatsu didn't have any votes, so their closing chapters will be posted afterwards.

Choosing to not be claimed wasn't voted for, either, so that will not be included.

Since I have decided to go with multiple endings, they will be released along the same schedule (every Monday around 8a CST, unless I'm able to finish more than one ending in a week) in the following order:

Karamatsu

Jyushimatsu

Choromatsu

Ichimatsu

Todomatsu

Osomatsu

There will be mature, non-sexual themes in some of the chapters (there will be warnings as such, I do have some readers younger than 18), and I have been thinking the idea of making lemon endings into their own 'MATURE' rated story.

Let me know what you guys think.

Chapter 23

The night sky from (y/n)'s apartment wasn't as great of a view as he was hoping, but he wouldn't complain about it tonight. Osomatsu had smiled as he watched (y/n) retreat into a room, closing the door and locking it hard enough for him to hear, leaving him to take the opportunity to wander around her small apartment. His human form had dulled senses compared to his actual form, but nothing escaped his sharp eyes.

The bed was small, pushed against the wall across from the kitchen to clear a walking path from the front door to the small couch. As he sat down, the couch cushions were soft to his skin but the length wasn't long enough for him to stretch out completely, so he opted for propping his feet on the opposite arm as he rested his back against the other. The soft glow from his coral caught his eye in the window reflection.

If he was honest with himself, Osomatsu didn't want to be here. The skin he wore itched like crazy, and he could feel his scales underneath cry out for the cool waters of the ocean with every passing minute. His lungs spasmed every few moments or so, trying to get used to breathing the oxygen-rich air.

Everything about being on land was uncomfortable.

When had he become so complacent? When (y/n) had left him earlier, a younger Osomatsu would've left her high and dry, leaving a storm in his wake just because she made him wait. Instead, he had stayed patiently, keeping watch over her things like she asked and stayed out of the water until she jumped in first.

When (y/n) had returned with his coral, he couldn't help but stare at it. It was nestled right where it belonged, close to her heart and between her bre-
-

Osomatsu clicked his tongue in growing annoyance and looked back at the night sky beyond the window, a feeling of agitation growing for some reason.

He knew that Todomatsu would try something tonight, especially with the way he had tried to use (y/n). A soft click brought his focus on the door behind him, the one that (y/n) had locked.

"If you're going to stay the night, at least take this," He heard her groan as something moved through the air towards him, "I tend to keep the temperature on the cool side."

He caught the object, feeling the fuzzy texture of the fabric before snapping his wrist to expand it over his body. His eyes never moved from the window, locked onto her faint shadow in the glass. She seemed to pause, her eyes darting around aimlessly in thought before she spoke again.

"Did I--?"

"Yeah," His quick response was sharper than intended, knowing that she would ask if she interrupted him, "What else would I be thinking about other than tomorrow morning? I'm staying here because I don't know what Todomatsu or Jyushimatsu have planned. You're still mine...

for now

..."

The last words he bit out were angry, his emotions starting to unwind from their tightly knotted mess. Osomatsu rolled his eyes at himself, listening to the sounds coming from behind him, indicating that (y/n) had gotten into her tiny bed. He smothered a joke of him keeping her warm, remembering that she had made it very clear to him her opinion of his personality. He'd wait until tomorrow, then he could have fun with her for as long as he wanted.

"Did you...really want me to choose another brother...?" (Y/n) asked suddenly, bringing his full attention back to her.

"Of course not," His response was quick, his frustrations at her wanting to give

every

brother a chance making themselves known. He had claimed her first, so why couldn't he keep it, "You put my coral on, so you're mine by rights...but if you choose someone and can help them, then why wouldn't I jump at that opportunity?"

More silence from (y/n).

"Would it hurt you to lose your claim?"

"It's just coral. It's not attached to us in any special way," Osomatsu finally turned to look at her, noticing her eyes on his coral on the counter, "The few things special about it are that only a certain brother can hear it, and the others can't touch it directly. It's like holding a burning coal, and the feeling never goes away as long as skin contact remains."

"It's that painful, huh--?" Her voice softened as her breathing started to turn shallow.

"It makes you wonder how I know that, right?" He gave a smile before noticing that she had passed out, the smile fading from his lips as his eyes wandered over her face.

With her asleep, it was just a matter of time.

Osomatsu smirked as his mental timer lined up with (y/n) sitting up in her bed, her eyes open but not focusing on anything. A pink haze covered her colored hues as it simultaneously started to sink into them, Todomatsu's ability kinking into full effect. He tossed the blanket off and followed her into the bathroom, staying behind as she stared into the empty tub. (Y/n)'s hand reached out to the knob to refill the tub, but stopped on its own.

Osomatsu didn't interfere with her movement, watching as she seemed to be standing her ground against his youngest brother. Her body stood motionless, but he heard her breathing pick up, as if panicked by something. A bright red glow from the kitchen counter caught his attention, the light no longer pulsing.

"That's enough, Totty," Osomatsu reached out to (y/n) with two hands, one clamping down over her eyes and the other on the back of her neck.

The crystal clear waters swirled around Todomatsu and I, a dark red coloration creeping into the scenery. The heavy feeling in my head vanished as Todomatsu's lips curled into a snarl, his sharp teeth bare. A swirling dark tunnel opened up and pulled the pink merman away from me, leaving me to fall back into a supporting arm as I opened my eyes to see my bathroom ceiling.

"You asshole of an older brother! I wasn't doing anything to hurt her, okay?!" I heard Todomatsu screech from within the room, looking down to see a merman covered in bioluminescent pink markings, partially thrashing in the tub and splashing around what little water was in there. The arm that was supporting me lowered to let me lie on the floor, Osomatsu entering my vision and giving me a wink before turning back to the merman.

"My claim says otherwise," He grabbed Todomatsu by the throat and growled at him, pushing the pink merman against the bottom of the tub, "Your abilities may work against normal humans, but (y/n) still has my claim...or did you forget in your frenzy? I'll know when she's in any kind of danger, Totty."

The dark voice coming from Osomatsu didn't sound like him at all. It sounded like some kind of demon.

"I answered her questions and agreed to my payment!" Todomatsu tried to bite down on Osomatsu's arm, the pink and red glow from both brothers trying to overwhelm the other. I couldn't afford a new apartment if a fight broke out here...but did it matter?

"Wait!" I reached out for the back of Osomatsu's exposed calf, feeling his skin on my own, "Please, not here...The beach isn't that far away, so you guys can fight there if need be."

Osomatsu turned towards me, the bright red in his eyes fading as he looked at my hand on his scale tattoo. Todomatsu tried to wiggle out, but the older brother held him fast.

"We'll see you at Totoko's house," Without a further word of explanation, Osomatsu began dragging Todomatsu out of my apartment, the merman trying to fight the whole time. As the noise became quiet the further away the brothers went, I still lay on my bathroom floor, processing everything that just happened...and the reality of tomorrow morning.

I stumbled off the morning bus and walked towards Mrs. Yowai's house, a yawn forcing its way out of my mouth. I hadn't brought anything with me, seeing as I was about to make a potentially life-changing decision. I had already written emails to my friends and family about apologizing for not being in contact with them more often, and told them that I was going on a trip to realign my life, calling into work to inform my boss that I wasn't going to be showing up, as a new opportunity presented itself.

Many tears were shed and sleep was lost when I realized that morning had arrived before I knew it. This could possibly be the last time I walked somewhere if the merman I chose wasn't interested in me staying human.

I knocked on the door, and was instantly swept up into a hug.

"(L/n)!" Karamatsu called out, "I'm so glad that you survived the night."

He released me before looking closer at my face, "Oh, hey. Are you all right?"

"Yeah, I'm fine now...just had a lot of stuff happen in the last five hours," I nodded and gave an honest smile. It seemed to reassure him, and Karamatsu

brought me into the house, closing the door before leading me to the dining room where there was plated breakfast sitting in an open seat.

"Go ahead and eat," Mrs. Yowai called out from the kitchen, "I made too much."

"T-thanks for the food," I stuttered as I sat down, wary of the change in behavior. I ate the food served on the plate, realizing that the temperature was still hot as if it was just off the stovetop. I slowed down and enjoyed the meal, finishing off the tea that was poured as Karamatsu sat next to me.

"Nervous?"

"Of course...The name I'm going to say is going to change my life in one way or another," I put the near empty cup down, "Who wouldn't be nervous about this?"

"Someone who knows what they want," Karamatsu laughed a little, but stopped when I didn't respond. My eyes wandered to the open door leading to the beach, hearing some voices talk loudly down by the shoreline. I could hear Ichimatsu and Choromatsu clearly.

"Am I doing the right thing?"

Karamatsu stayed silent for a while before answering, "That depends on who you ask. I think that you're doing the best that you could with the crazy amount of events that have happened to you in the last week."

"It has only been a week, hasn't it?" I looked back at him, "It definitely feels a lot longer than that."

I finished off the tea and stood up, making my way over to the staircase down to the beach. My hand was grabbed by another, turning me around and pulling me into another hug from Karamatsu.

"Before you go, I just wanted to say that I had fun with you, (l/n)," I heard his voice behind my head as he pushed me into his shoulder, "I know that you'll choose of your own free will."

"It's not like this is goodbye forever, Karamatsu," I returned the hug before pulling away, "Maybe the brother I choose will let me come back from time to time."

He didn't respond, only giving a slight smile in return as I moved back towards the beach.

The shoreline was crowded with five mermen, each of them spaced apart from the others and three eyeing the other two warily. The two in question were Jyushimatsu and Todomatsu, both of whom were looking worse for the wear.

Jyushimatsu appeared to have gathered some battle wounds after yesterday evening, the wounds starting to heal over into thick scabs that were sure to leave scars. I couldn't tell what kind of animal made them, but anything was possible at the depth that he chose to live.

Todomatsu bore several bite marks and cuts on his back and arms, his eyes never looking away from Osomatsu by the leftmost breakwater. Despite both Jyushimatsu and Todomatsu displaying their bioluminescent colors, they were somehow waiting patiently near the shoreline, almost huddled together by the right breakwater.

Ichimatsu was the closest merman to the rogue duo, staying about four meters away from them. His head wasn't above water, but I could see the purple colored scales underneath the surface, the morning sun reflecting them beautifully.

Choromatsu was at his usual post, splitting the shoreline in half with his back towards me.

Osomatsu was much farther away, leaving a large gap between himself and Choromatsu. His eyes never left Todomatsu and Jyushimatsu's area, as if monitoring them to ensure that I could say my piece before either one could grab me.

Karamatsu walked up from behind me and filled in the space between Choromatsu and Osomatsu, turning to pick up a conversation with the

eldest.

I waited until Ichimatsu's head was above water before I spoke, gathering my thoughts in the meantime.

"I--" My voice cut through the conversations and each brother looked over at me at once, the synchronization startling me a bit, "I feel like I've been cruel to each of you at some point this week, and for that I'm sorry. I became involved with you all by accident, but I stayed because I feel like I can help with your family curse, regardless if it was voluntary or not. I couldn't shake this feeling for the whole week, and I know that I could've walked away at any point."

A name made itself known in my head, reminding me of the one I chose.

"With that in mind, I choose--"

Chapter 24 - Karamatsu's Ending

A name made itself known in my head, reminding me of the one I chose.

"With that in mind, I choose--"

I gave the brothers on the shoreline a good look before settling on Karamatsu, the man I knew as Genki Iemon. His green eyes didn't waver as I walked over towards him.

"Karamatsu," I pulled out the vial hanging around my neck, empty of the red coral.

"Wow, wow, wow!" His features pulled into a happy expression, pulling me close and lifting me up in a spin, "I really didn't think you'd say my name!"

"Hey..." Osomatsu growled in a low tone, making Karamatsu and I turn towards him. The red merman was much closer than before, having left the breakwater's shadow and was as close as he could be without crawling completely onto land.

"Osomatsu," I stood my ground, despite Karamatsu's hand trying to push me back. I noticed the eldest flinch as I said his name, "I'm not going to forget everything that you've done for me while I had your claim, and want you to know I wasn't using you for your protection, either. Yeah, I was angry when I found out that I was in your web, and maybe in another universe, I do choose you," I reach into my pants pocket, feeling the knobby coral with my fingertips as I pull it out, revealing the red coral and kneeling to hold it out to Osomatsu.

"But that's not the choice I'm making," I finished with a smile, watching the red merman snatch the coral from my hand before moving back into the water while gritting his teeth.

"...(L/n), are you sure about this?" Karamatsu quietly asked. I closed my eyes briefly before standing up to face him, looking into his bright emerald

eyes.

"I gave my final say. I'm not taking anything back," I took the glass vial off from around my neck and held it out to him, a smile on my face. His finger trembled against my skin as he took the vial from my open palm, a look of disbelief mixed with relief washing over his face as the worried look fell away.

"You gave up being with one of us, just to be with some other human? Not only that, but you choose Painfulmatsu?!" A voice whined out, drawing my attention from Karamatsu to Todomatsu, a finger itching the side of his neck.

I didn't respond to the obvious set up, ignoring the weird nickname and tone.

"Tch, not even after what we did last night?" He licked his lips and lowered his eyelids over his pink eyes, "You're really gonna miss out if you go with

him

..."

I could feel the tension from the two brothers closest to me as Todomatsu lounged against the sandbank, lazily moving his tail above the surface in a mocking waving gesture. I felt Karamatsu's hand pull on my shoulder again as Osomatsu reached towards his own head, the movement in my peripheral vision.

"Are you sure you're remembering correctly? I remembered that you practically forced yourself onto me when I was under your influence," I didn't break eye contact with the youngest.

"Oh, I'm pretty sure," His tail dipped under the water, "In fact, you were begging for it..."

"(Y/n), don't listen--!" I heard Karamatsu cry out before Todomatsu's hands touched my face, my mind foggy as my world swirled in blue variations,

only feeling cold as Todomatsu gazed into my eyes. His pink eyes were hypnotic, flashing between different shades of pink as he spoke. I didn't remember even seeing him move from his spot on the shoreline...

"Come now, my little (y/n)...you know you didn't mean to say my older brother's name, right?"

No, I meant what I...

"Yeah..." The thought never made it to my mouth.

"Were you going to say my name instead?" His face was so close to mine, my nose picking up a scent of something sickeningly sweet, like sugar that was cooked too long.

No way!

"Yes..."

I screamed internally and tried to shake myself away from Todomatsu, his lips dangerously close. He suddenly closed the distance, yelling and screaming echoing from somewhere else as my body responded on instinct. My mouth opened to his as his tongue danced with my own, my arms reaching forward to bring him closer to me, pressing myself against him as the kiss continued.

I couldn't look where I was, my body wouldn't follow anything I told it to. Did Todomatsu have the ability to...control people when they were awake...?

Karamatsu tried to catch (y/n) when she fell, collapsing onto the sand after hearing Totty's song. He had tried to warn her, but now all he could do was watch as her body begin to shut down. Osomatsu cut off Todomatsu's exit before the youngest brother could flee, wrestling him back to the shore while Ichimatsu and Jyushimatsu watched and waited.

Karamatsu lay the woman who picked him flat on the sand, propping her head up a little as he knelt down to listen to her breathing, panic fighting to take over his rational thinking. He heard the soft thumping within her chest, not as strong as it was and definitely starting to slow down. Karamatsu started doing the only thing he could: chest compressions.

The first push sent water gushing from her throat, shocking him and interrupting the process. He shook his head and kept pushing, counting out two compressions per second for thirty seconds before tilting her head back and breathing into her twice, watching her chest rise and fall. With no immediate response, Karamatsu started it again as tears started falling from his eyes.

On the twenty-ninth second, (y/n) took in a breath and started coughing, spitting up more water that he hadn't gotten rid of. With a shout of joy, Karamatsu immediately rolled her onto her left side, making her bend her right leg and propping her head up on her right arm.

"Is she alive?!" Choromatsu asked from the shoreline, acting as a barrier between their fighting brothers and (y/n).

"Yeah, but I don't know if she'll wake up," Karamatsu wiped his mouth, his face a little flushed at the thought of him kissing (y/n), "What's going on with the others?"

"They were yelling about something--" Choromatsu stopped as Karamatsu took off his shirt, laying it over (y/n) like a blanket, "What do you think you're doing?"

"Taking care of family business," Karamatsu walked into the water, jumping into a dive and swimming towards his fighting brothers.

Both the pink and red merman were a tangle of fins and venom, screeching and clawing at each other as Karamatsu swam closer. Coughing out the air in his lungs, Karamatsu breathed in the ocean water, wincing as his unused gills hadn't touched water in a long time. When they were acclimated and had reached full capacity, he blasted out an unearthly echoing shriek that created rippling shockwaves in the water all around him.

Both mermen recoiled and pulled away from each other, crying out in pain as their hands went to their ears.

"Goddamn-- Karamatsu, what the fuck?!" Osomatsu cried out as he shook his head, haphazardly swimming away from Todomatsu. The youngest brother yelled in pain as he thrashed about in the water, his body pale and his ears starting to leak blood from underneath his hands.

"I can't let you guys kill each other," He swam towards Osomatsu, glancing back towards Todomatsu.

"It's not my fault that he wanted to escape," The eldest motioned towards their youngest brother, sighing as his flexed out his fins and shook them a little, allowing the loose sheaths to cover up his venomous spines again, "How is (y/n)?"

"Recovering. I'm sure that she'll make it, but she's not going to be happy when she wakes up," Karamatsu took a deep breath, slowly letting it out before looking at his oldest brother, "Will you be able to take care of the rest?"

"You're asking me

that

after hitting me with your sonic yell?" Osomatsu raised an eyebrow in disbelief, "Yeah, fine...it's not like you could hurt me even if you tried..."

"I knew that I can count on you!" He gave Osomatsu a slap to the back before swimming to the beach, spitting out the salt water as he slowly replaced it with air. He knelt next to (y/n), still unconscious but breathing and stable.

"Choromatsu, I'm going to take her inside and clean her up."

"'Clean her u'--? Excuse you?!" He gaped as Karamatsu gently picked (y/n) up and started walking towards the house, "You know that molesters go to hell, right?"

"I'm a gentleman when it comes to women," Karamatsu flashed a smile back at the green merman, "They can't help but flock to me when they see how generous and gentle I am! Ah, my Karamatsu girls!" He cut himself off by closing the door behind him. Standing quietly in the doorway for a moment, he lowered his head to (y/n)'s, crying softly into her hair as she slept.

I woke up lying on a futon bed, my body was covered by a duvet and my head cradled by something soft. I looked up to see Karamatsu's green eyes looking down at me with a soft smile on my face.

"Kara--"

"Shh...no need to speak. Osomatsu took care of the problem," His fingers brushed against my forehead to push some loose hair away.

"Oh...what happened?" My memory was dark after Todomatsu started kissing me. I must've looked worried as Karamatsu shifted his hand to cup my left cheek.

"Totty tried to drown you in one of his projections," His eyes softened, "Whatever you saw wasn't real, and it was something that only he wanted you to see."

His words sent a wave of relief washing over my body, my eyes tearing up as I held his hand against my cheek, not caring if I openly cried in front of him. I don't know how long I cried, reminded of how Karamatsu had always cared about me even in the beginning -- holding me while I broke apart in my apartment, and now again in this dark and quiet room. I opened my eyes again to meet his, sniffing pitifully.

"I don't mind being a shoulder for you, (y/n)."

"You've been a shoulder to me for a while," I smiled and reached up to his head, trying to poke the tip of his nose but hitting his cheek instead, "Oh, I guess I'm still tired."

"Before you go to sleep...may I?" He brought a small box into view, a thick blue ribbon tied around it. I gently moved up into a sitting position, wrapping the duvet around my shoulders to stay warm, looking at the box quizzically.

"What is that?"

"It's...my coral, from a long time ago," He untied the ribbon and carefully opened the box, lifting out a small growth of blue hammer coral. Turning it around, he showed that it was attached to a hair clip before motioning towards me, "May I put it on you?"

"Of course," I nodded and sat closer with my back to him, feeling him pull some hair back on the right side of my head, sliding the clip over my ear before locking it into place. The room filled with silence, as if it were waiting for something to happen.

"Feel any different?" Karamatsu's eyebrows creased in worry.

"No...? Not really," I responded.

"Oh, good," He let out a breath I didn't realize he was holding, before moving in front of me with a smile, "Do...you remember showing me your scars?"

"From a few days ago? Yeah."

He gently took my right arm, the forearm naked without sleeves to hide the scars from Jyushimatsu. Gently pressing his lips to the skin, he quietly kissed them as he closed his eyes. When he pulled away, his green eyes looked up at mine, the spring green glowing softly in the dark.

"I promise that it will be the last time you're injured," He brought his face close to mine, pressing our foreheads together as he kept looking into my eyes, "I promise."

Chapter 24 - Jyushimatsu's Ending

A name made itself known in my head, reminding me of the one I chose.

"With that in mind, I choose--"

My eyes wandered towards the water, soon making eye contact with one of the rogue pair. Jyushimatsu held my gaze as I walked over to the yellow merman, his face betraying what was going through his mind. Brown mixed with yellow in his eyes as I revealed an empty vial from underneath my shirt, the red coral nowhere to be seen.

"What did you do--?!" I heard Osomatsu before I felt a sharp tug on my left wrist, suddenly feeling cold water wrapped around me as I was pulled into the ocean.

"(Y/n)--!" Ichimatsu's voice sounded far away underwater.

I clung to whatever breath was in my lungs as the water rushed past my ears, pulling my hair back and tugging at my clothing. I should've expected this kind of outcome with the reaction that Jyushimatsu gave me yesterday. With no knife to defend myself with, I was completely at his mercy.

"You chose me, you chose me!" Jyushimatsu called out happily, dragging me down further as the water began to change to a cooler temperature. I tried to tug my wrist back from him, but failed as his grip became vice-like.

One of us will kill you

, Ichimatsu's warning echoed in my head. My lungs spasmed as I reached my limit, trying every trick in the book that I knew to somehow keep myself conscious.

Jyushimatsu...

I started to slip out of consciousness, barely feeling the change in direction as Jyushimatsu continued to pull me down.

A light dripping sound roused my mind back to life. It took all of my strength to just open my eyes, my body stiff and cold. The ground underneath me felt damp and hard, bumps and grooves somehow cut into it. As my eyes adjusted to the low light that seemed to be coming from somewhere, my mind pieced together that I must be in some sort of underwater cave, the air barely breathable with no visible source of fresh oxygen.

How long have I been here?

Changing my breathing to short, shallow breaths, I moved my fingers and toes gently to test if my spine was injured. Everything responded, so I took my time moving into a sitting position, the ceiling of the cave rubbing against the top of my head. I felt my right fingers dip into cold water, looking down to see that I was laying right next to a large water entrance.

I didn't see Jyushimatsu waiting at the surface or within the little pocket cave, so I could only guess that I was alone. There wasn't enough oxygen to take a deep breath to try and swim to the surface, and I didn't know how far down I was. I

should

wait for him, but there was no indication that Jyushimatsu would even come back for me, and I'd most likely die from suffocation before he did.

I took as deep a breath as I could through my nose before falling forward into the cold water, the temperature waking me up like a slap to the face. The water was much darker than I thought it was but the pressure in my ears wasn't terrible, both revealing that it must've been nighttime

and

I was still shallow enough to survive underwater with the amount of air I took in. I kicked off of the cliffside, navigating my way towards the surface slow enough to not ruin my body. After a few tense moments, I breached the surface and took in as many breaths as I could as my mind pushed through the internal haze of my memories.

The full moon was out in the clear night sky, the stars on full display in the inky black, providing me with enough light to see that I was completely alone in the dark, calm waters. I couldn't see any lighthouses, landmarks, or even sidelights of boats or rigs on the horizon. I felt for my vial necklace, only to find it missing and my heart fell to the pit of my stomach.

How naïve could I have been? I trusted the sane part of Jyushimatsu that I had seen for a short time frame, and momentarily forgot about the fact that he was the cause of the family curse on the brothers. Did he go rogue while dragging me out to sea, and just left me here to die?

A splash towards my left side caught my attention, turning my head to see a partial silhouette of a head and shoulders. In growing horror, I could only stare as a pink glow emanated from the form, starting underwater on his chest and growing stronger as it reached his neck and eyes, the pink hues glaring right at me.

Todomatsu...!

"That wasn't very fair, (y/n)," He crept towards me, his head unmoving as the water parted around him, "I answered your questions, and you thought that by not choosing me you wouldn't have to give up your payment?"

"That wasn't what I was doing, Todomatsu," I waved my arms in a pushing motion in the water, sending me backwards a little. Todomatsu suddenly surged forward and grabbed both of my wrists, dragging me closer to him, his brilliant pink eyes staring down at me as I tried to get away. His free hand grabbed ahold of my wet hair, pulling it down and forcing my head to bend back. The sudden pain caused tears to well up in my eyes, and I cried out in surprise and horror.

"It sure looks like it," The neutral look on his face was more terrifying than any expression I've seen on any of the brothers, wincing as his grip on my wrists tightened, "I'll leave some of you, as a 'thank you' to Jyushimatsu for not claiming you."

"Todomatsu, please stop...!" I could feel fear claw at my throat as he lowered his head to my left forearm, his lips lightly kissing the skin before revealing a set of long sharp teeth. I kicked at the pink siren, hitting his abdomen and his chest, trying to break free before he killed me. There was no coral on me to drive him away, no claim to call Jyushimatsu for me.

I screamed as I felt Todomatsu's teeth bite down into my arm, the pain more terrible than when I was attacked by Jyushimatsu. I struggled harder, feeling individual hairs being ripped from my scalp as I tried to fight him off. If I was destined to die, then I would die on my own terms and not sit back to just let it happen. I was pulled underwater as Todomatsu tugged on my arm, releasing my wrists to grab at my throat, his hand cold as it tightened around my neck. His teeth sunk into my arm even more, the pain washing over me in waves as it fought with the adrenaline coursing through my body.

Taking a fistful of his hair in my free hand, I pulled at his head in a similar way that he still had mine. He refused to let go, clamping down on my forearm harder until we both heard a sharp snapping sound. I stilled for a second before realization and pain flooded my mind, making me scream into the water and waste what little oxygen I had left. Todomatsu's hand shifted from my hair to join the first one around my neck, starting to squeeze with a strength that I feared would snap my neck in two. I felt a pull on my broken arm before I breathed in air.

Air?

A familiar weight settled itself onto my face -- a breathing mask. Confused, I lifted my right hand to it and felt around. It was, indeed, a breathing mask with a hose of air trailing downwards. Before I could question it, I heard a monsterous screech in front of me.

A clash of pink and yellow monsters writhed in front of my eyes, a betta tail and a shark tail rolling in the water dangerously close to me. I kicked myself away from them, not moving my injured arm, and felt for the familiar weight of an air tank at the end of the airline, slipping it over my uninjured shoulder as I moved away.

"She promised me!" I heard Todomatsu yell out from the fighting pair.

"(Y/n) chose me, not you," Jyushimatsu snarled, his voice much clearer than previously, "I

will

keep her safe!"

"You know what will happen if you--"

"That's exactly why!"

Todomatsu shrieked and pulled away from Jyushimatsu, his eyes locking onto my form and bolting towards me, "I

won't

let you take this from me!"

I watched as Jyushimatsu darted ahead of him, grabbing me and swimming away as Todomatsu tried to follow. The water became heavy and thick, almost to the consistency of honey, slowing Jyushimatsu quite a bit. The glare in his yellow eyes sent a chill down my spine as it swept over me to look behind him, his grip tightening a little before relaxing.

"Do you still want to help my brothers, (y/n)?" I could hear a change in his voice, no longer the carefree and wild tone from before. It sounded sure and confident.

"Yeah," I flinched as I felt another wave of pain coursing through my body, radiating out from my arm.

"Then kiss me and it'll all be over," He looked back towards me, the yellow glow still in his eyes.

"Are you sure--?"

"Don't you

dare

do it!" Todomatsu sounded much closer than before, either fear or panic in his voice.

I took a deep breath before pulling off my mask, pressing my lips against Jyushimatsu's and feeling him return the kiss, one of his hands moving up behind my head. He pulled away first, quickly pushing the mask back on before flinching away from me, releasing me from his hold. Todomatsu had stopped moving as well, crying out in pain as the water returned to its natural state, his control completely gone.

Both mermen cried out as the glow from their bodies seemed to explode out of their skin, the markings shrinking as the lights grew in intensity. Each colored light hovered above their bodies until the marks vanished on their skin, dragging out the colors from their eyes. The two colors slowly faded into nothingness as both bodies drifted downwards, unmoving and unresponsive.

"Jyushimatsu!" I cried out as I swam towards him, reaching out with my left arm...only to find it partially missing.

The stump of my arm ended just below my left elbow, the bone and muscles fully exposed to the sea water. Pushing the horror out of my mind, I focused on keeping Jyushimatsu from falling to the bottom of the ocean, a place where I couldn't swim to. Biting past the pain, I cradled him to my chest with my stump of an arm as I swam towards the coral cliff nearby, keeping him flat as I swam on my back with a partial backstroke using my full arm.

Laying him down on a bed of sand, I quickly ripped off my shirt and tied it as well as I could around my left stump, knowing that I'd most likely lose

the whole arm faster if I left it uncovered. Looking back to Jyushimatsu, I didn't see any kind of marking or scar on him, and his chest moved with each breath he took. Gently laying my only hand on his chest, I felt a heartbeat as partial relief flushed over me. It was possible that Jyushimatsu would survive this.

However, I was a different matter.

I didn't have the strength to swim to land, and I never studied the night sky to understand how to use it as a map. My left arm was nearing the point of no return, and I didn't have any form of tourniquet to minimize the bleeding. Panic started to finally set in as the adrenaline wore off from the fight, and my breath became more ragged as seconds passed.

"No...not like this...I didn't want to die like this..." I fought back tears, fear and hopelessness rolling over me like a tsunami.

I didn't want to die at all!

"Karamatsu can fix this..." I heard Jyushimatsu groan from behind me, "I know he can."

I turned to face the yellow merman rubbing his head, a slight frown spread across his face as he looked at me from my traumatically amputated arm. The hurt was prevalent in his eyes, making it obvious that he felt guilty about not arriving sooner.

"I know you can get there in time," I tried to give him a reassuring smile as he cautiously held me close, taking off to wherever his senses had told him Karamatsu was.

I took in a deep breath before opening my eyes, feeling a slight breeze against my skin as nearby waves lapped against a shoreline.

Shoreline? Breeze...?

Opening my eyes took a bit of effort, though. I felt something heavy in my right hand, glancing down to see Jyushimatsu laying on the sandy shore unconscious while holding my hand in his.

"You're awake," Karamatsu's voice was hushed to my left, drawing my attention to him. He was leaning against a rock from some sort of breakwater, his arms folded against his chest.

"I guess I passed--" I stopped myself, raising my left arm. There was no pain but my forearm was still gone, the skin healed over my elbow, "...what do I owe you...?"

"Nothing," His reply was soft despite the quiet, "You did something we all thought was impossible."

"What are you talking about?" I moved to sit up, still holding Jyushimatsu's hand.

"The curse. I was talking with Choromatsu when it happened," He leaned forward a little bit, unfolding his arms. I didn't see any kind of fresh scar on him, but I could only guess how badly he had to cut himself to heal over an amputation wound.

"Ah...yeah...Jyushimatsu told me that if I kissed him, then the curse would go away," I went to scratch my neck with my left hand, but just rubbed the stump against it, "We were fighting off Todomatsu--"

"Totty?" Karamatsu moved a little closer, "Don't tell me that he--"

"Yeah...he was the one who bit off her arm," A yawn sounded out next to me, signalling that Jyushimatsu was awake.

"That Todomatsu...In regards to your request, Jyushimatsu, I'll still keep my word," Karamatsu stood up, brushing off the sand. Jyushimatsu only gave a nod as the older brother walked towards Mrs. Yowai's house, the lights already darkened. I gave a small wave with my right hand as he walked away.

"Ready...?" Jyushimatsu took my hand and gave me a wide smile, clearly visible in the moonlight.

"Ready for...?"

"This."

He leaned forward to touch my chest, his hand resting on my sternum just over my breasts. A warm pulse radiated out from his hand, a rough object rubbing against my skin as he pulled his hand away. I saw a piece of yellow coral pressed into my skin, as if it was growing out of me, shaped like a rough cross, or 't' shape.

"It's beautiful, and it didn't hurt," I returned his excited smile, putting my hand on his cheek.

"I didn't want it to," He leaned in further and kissed me on the lips, gripping my shoulders and dragging me on top of him, "I've caused you enough pain."

Chapter 24 - Choromatsu's Ending

A name made itself known in my head, reminding me of the one I chose.

"With that in mind, I choose--"

Taking a breath mid sentence, I looked towards Choromatsu. I opened my mouth to say his name when a sharp laughter cut me off.

"There's no way that you're choosing

him

!"

I turned to glare at Todomatsu, his hand hitting the water as if I just told the funniest joke he'd ever heard. His laughter continued until the palm of my hand struck across his face, my lips twisted into a frown. I didn't register what I had done until the sound silenced the area. His face was full of shock as he turned back towards me, his eyes conflicted with emotions.

"I choose Choromatsu," I bit out each word, angry at the pink merman that had tried to kill me twice in my sleep. My fists clenched and I planted my feet into the sand, the water lapping at my calves as I looked him in the eye unafraid, "I choose

Choromatsu

."

"You think...that you can make a promise with me, and break it not hours later...?" The growl in Todomatsu's voice grew as his black irises narrowed within his pink eyes, "We made a deal, (y/n)."

"No, we

didn't

. I only agreed to that deal

if I choose you

," I didn't back away, fully understanding the peril I was in. I needed to make a point, "...and I didn't say your name."

"You conniving--!" Todomatsu lashed out with his left hand, his sharp talons ripping through my shorts and shirt, cutting into my abdomen. I staggered back with a grunt, wrapping both arms around my midriff but maintaining my glare.

"Totty!" I heard Choromatsu bark out, the water frothing in the space between us before Todomatsu was dragged away from me, a screech of displeasure emanating from the pink merman, "(Y/n), are you okay?"

"I'm well enough..." I lied as I felt an icy chill begin to spread from my stomach, overriding the heat of my anger.

"You're a lying bitch!" Todomatsu screamed as he twisted against the pulling current, "No one gets away with lying to me!"

"Totty, that's enough..." Osomatsu lazily called out from the other side of the shoreline, "You weren't picked, just like the rest of us."

I watched quietly as Jyushimatsu and Ichimatsu sank out of sight, their colored fins vanishing in the dark waters beyond the beach. Osomatsu disappeared under the water before Todomatsu was pulled underneath, still shouting and yelling at me. When the din quieted, I released my arms from my abs, watching large globs of blood fall onto the beach.

"Oops..." I forced out a laugh before looking towards Choromatsu, "Knew that was gonna happen at some point..."

"(Y/n)!" I watched as Choromatsu dug into the sand in front of me, the shallow water making it hard for him to come close. His hand reached out and lightly pulled the shirt up enough to expose the claw marks, the wounds

not deep enough to cause significant damage to the muscle, but could leave a nasty scar if untreated, "Karamatsu, could you?"

"Of course, brother!" Karamatsu briskly walked over, rolling up one of his sleeves and pulling something from his breast pocket. I shuddered as I was forced to lay down on the warm sand, the sunlight cascading down.

I felt strangely cold, no longer feeling any pain in my abdomen. Something warm splashed onto my skin, the feeling jolting me from whatever fog was in my head as I looked down to see a small trickling of blood drip from Karamatsu's inner arm onto the scratches. The chill lingered as Karamatsu wiped his blood off of my skin, his face loosening in relief as the wounds had sealed themselves up.

"I think...I was poisoned..." I tightened my hand into a fist, dragging some sand with it as I covered my naked midriff with my other arm.

"Do you feel cold?" Choromatsu reached out to touch my clenched fist, his skin warm against mine. With a grunted effort, he put his other hand on my cheek only to pull back in shock, "You're burning up!"

"I don't know if my abilities can help with that...I'll go call an ambulance!" Karamatsu pulled down his sleeve roughly, running towards Mrs. Yowai's house. I felt the ocean water surround me gently, swelling the water level to where Choromatsu could be next to me without crawling onto land. His arm cradled my shoulders as he pushed some water over my midriff, washing the blood away completely.

"I need you to come back to me, okay?" He rested his forehead against mine, his face full of worry.

"I want to come back..." I started to wince, my lungs feeling like they were being squeezed in a vice, "I want to see the world with you, Choro..."

"They'll be here as soon as they can!" Karamatsu called from the house, his voice vibrating as he ran down the stairs. Choromatsu released me and had the water recede back as Karamatsu tucked a thick blanket around me, both brothers staying by my side, "Choro, did you want me to accompany her?"

"Yeah, be my eyes."

I focused on breathing, fighting off fatigue as much as I could while taking in slow breaths. There was a whirlwind of noise as I focused, disregarding the movement I was feeling until I could keep myself awake no longer.

My eyes felt heavy as I opened them, letting them slowly adjust to the brightness of where I was. The white room was familiar, the monotony broken by a figure sitting in a chair next to me, its dark hair unkempt as the head bobbed up and down with its breathing. I moved my head to look at the figure, the fogginess in my head slowly lifting as I put together what had happened before I opened my eyes.

All six brothers were assembled at the beachhead and I had chosen Choromatsu, standing my ground against a frenzied Todomatsu. His talons had some kind of venom that wasn't undone by Karamatsu's special blood, and I was rushed to the hospital. Karamatsu had volunteered to come along with me, supposedly staying by my side throughout the entire thing.

I raised a hand to my forehead, barely moving underneath the heavy blankets that were draped over me. The movement seemed to awaken Karamatsu, a yawn sounding out before he looked towards me.

"Welcome back..."

"...did I go somewhere...?"

"Very nearly, (y/n). You were touch-and-go for a while before the doctors managed to stabilize you," He scooted his chair closer, leaning his arms heavily on the sides of the hospital bed, "They told me that they believe you were stung by either a lionfish or a stonefish, but couldn't find the puncture wound anywhere on your body."

"'Lionfish', huh? Wouldn't Osomatsu be proud to hear that?" I gave a small smile, laughing a little before spiraling into a coughing fit, my throat sore and scratchy. Karamatsu sat up and reached for something next to him,

bringing a small cup of water into my view, a white bendy straw being offered towards me. I took in a little water, the cold not doing much to soothe my throat.

"Just focus on getting better. Choromatsu has been getting antsy while you're laying here without his claim," Karamatsu put the cup back down where he retrieved it from, his normally bright green eyes clouded over with thought.

"I've always wondered..." I turned back towards him, "Why are you the only one with green eyes? The rest of your family has dark brown eyes."

"Black, but yeah...I was kinda wondering if you'd ever ask," He gave me a smile while leaning back into his chair, "I'm not sure, but the only guess I have is that it happened back at the labs. I've always had this color afterwards."

I hummed as I thought through the answer, a little surprised that it wasn't colored contacts to hide his identity. His hand lay heavily on my forehead, distracting me from my thoughts.

"Speaking for Choromatsu, please go back to sleep and rest. You've been here for longer than he would like, and the sooner you heal, the faster he can calm down."

I only nodded before feeling myself slip into a deep sleep.

With the hospital clearing my release a few days later, I realized that I was unconscious for a grand total of five days, the venom from Todomatsu clearly doing more damage to me than I realized. I paid off what I owed and thanked the staff for their help, escorted by Karamatsu back to Mrs. Yowai's house on a taxi ride that took thirty minutes with traffic. Karamatsu looked tired and exhausted, falling asleep on the way over and waking himself up with a shake of his head before the cycle repeated itself. Paying the cab fare, I helped Karamatsu into Mrs. Yowai's house and laid him to sleep in the room he pointed to as his own.

After ensuring that he was sleeping, I greeted Mrs. Yowai as I headed towards the private beach, seeing my green merman sitting in his usual spot in the water. I tried to not make any sound before putting my arms around his shoulders and burying my head into the crook of his neck. Choromatsu stiffened at the contact before relaxing, his hands rubbing my arms.

"You're back."

"I told you I would be," I released my hug before kneeling at the waterline on the beach, his head turning to watch me.

"(Y/n), you said that you wanted to see the world with me before they took you away..." His voice sounded tense, "Did you...still want to do that?"

The expression he wore looked something between nervousness and defeat, as if he predicted that I'd deny what I had said in my venom-induced stupor. I returned his worry with a soft look on my face, a smile tugging at my lips.

"Of course I do. I'd like that very much," I shifted into a sitting position, draping my arms over my knees, "I'd like to see and explore the world's oceans with you."

Relief swept over Choromatsu's face like a rushing tide, his mouth turning from a frown into a wide smile, "Oh, I'm so glad to hear you say that!"

His fingers fumbled with something in his hair, pulling out the same green brain coral that he tried to use earlier. His eyes darted towards my chest before his hands clenched around the tiny coral, a crunching sound resonating from within his grasp until he uncurled his hands. The brain coral had somehow been pressed and stretched into a ring, the size looking like it would fit one of my fingers. Choromatsu paused as he didn't seem to know what to do for the next step.

I held out my right hand, the smile remaining on my lips. He jumped a little before he recognized what I was doing, taking my hand in his before slipping the coral ring onto my index finger. The ring seemed to constrict around my finger, hugging itself around the base of my index finger.

"Oh, good...I was so worried that it wouldn't fit..." Choromatsu breathed out a sigh of relief.

"If it didn't, I'd put it on a necklace," I laughed as I looked closer at the ring.

"So, you really don't mind?"

"Hmm?" I looked up, seeing Choromatsu's green scales reflect the evening sun that started to sink towards the horizon.

"Being mine."

"If I had a problem, I wouldn't have chosen you, Choromatsu," I caught his hand in mine, giving it a reaffirming squeeze.

Chapter 24 - Ichimatsu's Ending

A name made itself known in my head, reminding me of the one I chose.

"With that in mind, I choose Ichimatsu," I finished and called out to the purple merman that was starting to sink beneath the surface again, as if he thought he wasn't going to be called. Ichimatsu stopped moving and looked back at me, his eyes wide as if I had offended him.

"You're choosing your attempted murderer?" Osomatsu snickered, "This is a joke, right?"

"He may have tried to kill me, but he never tried to deceive me," I looked towards Osomatsu, "'Yamano'."

"Oh, come on!" He raised himself up on his hands, locking eyes with me as a frown crept over his lips, "I would've told you the truth

eventually

."

"I doubt it," I rolled my eyes as I put a hand on my hip.

"Whatever. Just give me my coral back, and I'll leave," He held out a hand expectantly. Fishing for the coral in my shorts pocket, I gently tossed it to him and watched as he grabbed it before leaving in a flourish of lionfish fins, his red form disappearing into the deeper waters beyond the beachfront. With one of the more worrisome brothers gone, I released a breath I was holding, thankful that he hadn't unleashed a terrifying storm like last time.

I turned to Ichimatsu, noticing that Jyushimatsu had slipped away while I was talking to the eldest, leaving Todomatsu alone by the breakwater, a quiet fury in his glowing eyes.

"What?" I returned his dark scowl with a frown, not moving from the safety of the beach.

"Tch..." was his only reply before furiously turning in the water, his tail sending a small wave crashing against the shore as he disappeared underneath the water. I expected him to throw some sort of tantrum, with the talk that we had last night only happening because I enticed him with what he wanted: my death.

After ensuring that the larger threats were not in the area, I moved into the water towards Ichimatsu, who had remained where he was when I called out his name. His tail was positioned similar to an anchor on the sand, the end of his fin starting where the water reached my knees. I didn't move any further towards him in hopes of keeping my clothes dry, gently poking the edge of his fin with my big toe. It felt like there was a thin membrane on the surface of the fin, some kind of mucus-like film to keep the water from creating drag as he swam, and possibly doubling as an exterior 'coat' to keep him warm in the deep waters.

"...what..." Ichimatsu didn't pose the word as a question, most of his body motionless underwater. I realized that he didn't flinch away when I touched him with my toe, thinking back to when he chased away physical contact with me.

"I'm not sure," I was honest in my response, "No one really raised a fuss, and I was kinda expecting a backlash after a few events happened."

"Because they think that by choosing me, you sealed your death."

"I don't think so," I shook my head as I looked into his narrowed eyes, seeing his regular dark hues look right back, "If you really wanted me dead, you would've done it when I touched you just now. Unless...you want to kill me somewhere else in private."

I heard Choromatsu scoff behind me.

"..." Ichimatsu sank beneath the surface, his tail pulling away from my foot as he vanished into the ocean, his purple scales blending into the deep blue

coloration. I could only stand there as he swam away from me, my heart hurting as the merman that I wanted to be with...appeared to reject me.

"(Y/n)..." Karamatsu's voice was soft in the silence of the morning, "Give him some time to himself. I think he'll come back around eventually."

I hummed in response, not really agreeing or complaining about what he said. I

did

'kidnap' Ichimatsu when I found him injured a few nights ago, bringing him to my apartment without asking. Someone could construe that as preventing him from returning home on his own terms, even if he was suffering from Osomatsu's stings.

I watched in silence as the incense burned away, accelerated by the soft breeze flowing through the trees in the graveyard. I sat patiently with a calm mind until the incense had run out, taking my time in cleaning Mrs. Yowai's grave before leaving a small bouquet of colored flowers in a small vase, each color after one of the brothers. Karamatsu stood next to me in solemn stillness, both of our outfits dyed black in grieving. After leaving the flowers, I switched places with him to allow him time to say his annual greeting, updates, and farewells to her.

My colored gaze drifted upwards to the darkening sky, the pale blue afternoon skyscape being swallowed by deep gray storm clouds in the south. I could smell the crisp rain-laden wind as it pushed the clouds closer, telling me that it would be a bad storm. The dark clouds reminded me of the sea when Ichimatsu left the beach five years ago.

Five years already? I guess so...

Looking towards Karamatsu as he stood back up, we walked out of the graveyard and headed towards Mrs. Yowai's...my house. She had included me in her will as an inheritor of her material possessions and bank accounts.

The house had been in her family for generations, so the only payments owed were to keep it in shape for future generations.

"(Y/n)?" Karamatsu asked as we stepped through the threshold, taking off our shoes and jackets.

"Yeah...?"

"I'll be leaving for town in about thirty minutes for work. Did you need anything while I was there?" He asked the near daily question. I had given up working for an office, instead turning my experiences with the brothers into a written light novel series. It wasn't very popular, but the income was livable.

"Just any fresh vegetables you can find from the market," I nodded to him, "Don't break your wallet, though. Just one full bag will be enough."

"Sounds good," He disappeared into the room he had in the house. I didn't want to change any living arrangements that the family had with Mrs. Yowai, and that included Choromatsu. I moved into my room and disrobed, only putting on a shirt and sweatpants as I walked past a window that overlooked the beach. My eyes fell towards the spot where Choromatsu was before, now vacant.

He had wanted to travel around the world's oceans, his wish the same as when I asked him years ago. When Mrs. Yowai fell ill and I moved in to take care of her, he left quietly in the night.

"Heading back down?" Karamatsu called out from the kitchen.

"Yeah, I just want to watch the storm on the water," I responded quickly, opening the back door when I reached it.

"Just be wary of the waves. They do tend to get high around here."

"That's fine. I'm not terribly worried about them," I gave him a wave of my hand as he began to leave, "Have a good day, Karamatsu!"

He didn't verbally respond, only giving a smile and a wave in return, closing the door and leaving me alone. I headed down the staircase, letting my bare feet squish into the sand at the bottom as I made my way towards the shoreline.

I had always imagined what my life would've been like had I said another name. Would I be happy with my choice? Would Jyushimatsu and I be close friends? What about Karamatsu? Or even Osomatsu?

Would I have been better off?

A heavy sigh escaped my lips as I stood at the shoreline, the water lapping at my bare toes. The storm had definitely grown since I saw it in the graveyard, the expansion making me uneasy as I saw lightning flash underneath the clouds. I couldn't tell if this was nature unleashing its wrath, or if Osomatsu was upset. My eyes flicked back to where Choromatsu had been sitting years before, his leaving spelling disaster for the house. I was hoping against hope that it wouldn't happen so soon.

In a matter of moments, the stormhead was right over me, the vicious winds pulling at my hair and clothes as the waves began to swell into furious white caps that swirled about my knees. Sand from the beach was kicked up into the air, assaulting my eyes and skin before a cold rain poured down in sheets, obscuring my vision and making it difficult to retreat to the house. Cursing my own stupidity, I waded through the now waist-high waters towards the staircase, hoping to reach the house and secure the windows and doors.

As my right fingers brushed against the handrail, I felt a sharp tug on my left ankle, yanking me from the stairway and dragging me out into the open water. I plugged my nose with my left hand to keep the water from forcing its way in as I was pulled along at a seemingly high speed. I felt the movement of something underneath me, straining to look down and catching the sight of a shark fin.

"No claim! No claim for you!" A familiar happy laugh echoed in the water, the speaker letting go of my ankle before swimming in front of my face.

Jyushimatsu!

His glowing yellow eyes and markings were on full display as his hands pulled at my clothing, shoving the fabric aside and inspecting my body. I tried to push away from him, but he wouldn't back off. I couldn't tell where he had dragged me, but we were still within sight of the surface, the lightning dancing in the dark sky every so often. I released my nose and tried to kick myself away from Jyushimatsu.

He grabbed my ankle again with his hand and pulled me further away from the surface, a laughter emanating from him.

"No claim! No help!" He gripped a fistful of my shirt in his hand, twisting it and ripping it away before grasping my neck, tilting it away from my right shoulder as his sharp teeth gleamed in a lightning strike.

He's going to kill me!

I tried to throw an uppercut aimed at his chin, but my fist slipped off his skin, a slime-like texture felt as I tried to swing with my other hand.

Another miss.

My lungs spasmed as my held breath began to run out of fresh oxygen. Panic flooded my system, knowing that if I didn't find a way to get away from Jyushimatsu, I would die here.

A monstrous screech echoed from below, making Jyushimatsu pause as his teeth grazed my skin, his yellow eyes darting from me down towards where the sound came from. His grip suddenly loosened as a purple glow filled the bottom of my vision.

I couldn't waste any time.

Driving every bit of my remaining strength into my legs and arms, I swam towards the water surface, the waves rolling high with the white caps visible from underneath.

Breaching the water, I tried to take in a breath before a wave crashed over me, the force of the water driving me back under and dragging me along with its curve. Trying again to surface, I sputtered as the dark waters tossed me about like a ragdoll, only able to take in short breaths before being shoved under the foaming waves. The dark clouds overhead choked out any kind of sunlight, offering brief illumination by way of the lightning every so often. I felt the nerves on the back of my neck tense before I saw a white flash, my vision fading into darkness shortly after. The area I was in felt electrified, hurting my skin until the feeling dispersed after a few moments.

I was in a world of black, unable to see where I was going, even with the lightning all around me. Struggling to bring my head above water, I cried out in fear before another wave flooded my mouth and dragged me back under. There was no way to tell where I was going, my brain becoming confused and my body losing equilibrium as I was tossed everywhere.

I felt gentle hands take my own, pulling me to the left while staying underneath the waves before letting go. A wave rolled up and threw me somewhere with soft ground, my hands identifying sand and I crawled away from the water, coughing and taking deep breaths. I lay still as the water sounded like it was receding, calming down from the storm as it moved on. A hand curled itself around my left hand as my vision started to come back, seeing a purple-scaled merman laying next to me, beaching himself far from the shoreline.

"...Ichi..." I gave a tired smile, "...you dumbass..."

He looked away before I noticed a slight pink tint on his cheeks, his eyes still glowing purple and his markings lighting up the area around us. Fresh wounds were scattered over his torso and arms, bite marks and claw marks that were actively bleeding.

"I forgot..." He squeezed my hand, bringing my attention to a rough object pinned between our palms, "...this..."

When he let go, I saw a beautiful purple coral resting on my palm, shaped into a shell with a hole near the top. He pulled something from his hairpiece and threaded it through the hole, finishing it into a necklace before handing

it back to me. The storm quieted and the sun began to break through the tail clouds, starting to warm up my skin as I held the necklace, a flurry of emotions fighting in my brain to figure out which one I should express first.

"Did...it take you five years to find this?" I looked back up at him, seeing the dark color peek through the purple in his eyes.

He only nodded.

I stifled a laugh as I put the necklace on, the shell coral resting between my breasts.

Breasts?

I looked down at my chest, only to cry out and cover myself as I realized that I was completely exposed, my shirt front shredded from Jyushimatsu. Ichimatsu let out a single chuckle, bringing my attention to him.

"A torn shirt is better than losing a limb," He leaned in and put his forehead on mine, not breaking eye contact with me, "...may I...?"

I found myself lost in his purple eye color, never having seen them up close. Streaks of black ran through his eyes, accented heavily by the purple glow that seemed to pulse like a heartbeat. Both colors stood out strikingly against the black sclera, "...yeah..."

Our eyes closed as our lips connected -- tensely at first, but becoming more and more certain with the second and third kiss, building in confidence before the fifth. I felt warmth spread from where the shell lay on my skin, radiating outwards before Ichimatsu pulled back from the kiss.

"...sorry it took me so long...I had thrown it away many years ago..."

"I won't take it off," I could see his eyes lift in happiness before he seemed to realize he was expressing emotion, his face dropping back into a neutral position. I gave him a smile, "Ever."

Chapter 24 - Todomatsu's Ending

A name made itself known in my head, reminding me of the one I chose.

"With that in mind, I choose--"

I paused, my throat suddenly dry as I remembered my deal to him last night. I turned my head to look at the pink merman, a toothy smirk on his face as his narrowed eyes swept over my body, a taloned finger slowly tapping against a sharp canine tooth. I couldn't utter my murderer's name, only having enough strength to walk towards him.

"(Y/n)...Where do you think you're going?" Choromatsu called out, trying to catch my hand as I walked by him.

"My choice was made last night...when I made a deal with Todomatsu," I couldn't look at anyone, keeping my head down to not see their reactions.

"(Y/n), why?!" Karamatsu cried out in shock.

"What are you doing...?" I could hear the hurt in Ichimatsu's voice. I gritted my teeth and held back tears as I stopped in front of the pink merman, looking down at the hand he extended towards me. I slowly reached down, brushing my fingertips against his before I was pulled back, dragged away from the water.

"Please...reconsider this, (y/n)--" Karamatsu's voice rumbled against my back, his head lowered to rest on my shoulder, "You know what you're walking into...right...?"

"I don't have a long lifespan like you and your brothers...You guys would blink and I'd be gone..." I tried to convince myself, fighting back the tears by biting my bottom lip, "Wouldn't it be better to just get it over with sooner?"

His arms tightened around me, speaking louder than any words he could say.

"So...just let me ease you all of the surprise when it happens," I put a shaking hand on his forearm.

"When did you start lying to yourself?" The whisper didn't hide the anguish in Karamatsu's voice.

"...please don't make this harder for me..." I whimpered back to him, "You know that he'll keep pursuing me until he gets what he wants..."

Karamatsu released me without saying anything further, allowing me to walk back to Todomatsu freely. The pink merman waited patiently until I put my hand in his, the clammy skin cold under my touch.

In the blink of an eye, I was underwater.

A fierce pull tugged on my arm as the water rushed past my ears, my body limp as struggling now wouldn't be of any use. I had chosen the brother that had clearly wanted to kill me, and left it up to him how he wanted to do it. I wasn't strong enough to say a name, to save myself from what seemed to be my fate, and I wasn't strong enough to go out swinging. Time and time again, the aquatic family had proven that I was just a wimp when compared to their strength, and taking out Osomatsu's coral had removed the final barrier that was keeping Todomatsu at bay.

The water became colder as the light from the surface faded, both of us heading towards the depths of the ocean. I slowly let out the breath that I had kept in, my body numbing from the extreme temperatures. I'd rather be passed out or dead before he did anything else to me, his talons and teeth showing their ferocity in my bathroom just last night as Osomatsu carried him off.

Todomatsu pulled me lower still, my body no longer registering the cold and my vision began to fade.

A finger prodded at my left cheek, rousing my consciousness and slightly opening my eyes.

"So, you're the one that's been driving the brothers up the wall recently..." A soft feminine voice pouted, the finger poking my cheek again, harder and harder with each push, "Come on...wake up!"

"Stop..." I reached up to swat the hand away, feeling it retract before I could touch it, "What's going on...?"

"Thought I'd kill you straight away?" Todomatsu leaned into my line of sight from the right, "You're not getting off that easy, (y/n). Since you had such a defeatist attitude earlier, I wanted to...spice up your death just a little bit."

"Oh, Totty--" The female speaker piped up, a cold hand touching my left shoulder. I pulled away on instinct, looking over to see a young woman with long brown hair lounging on the ground next to me, her steel gray eyes glaring at me while a playful smile danced on her lips, "I can see why she peaked all of your interests."

"Who are you...?" I tried to back away from both of them, glancing around to realize that I was in some kind of underwater structure, metal walls bolted into place with rust spreading along the joints. It was a little hard to breathe, so it was possible that air was pumped into this...place, and the smell of salt was thick with each breath.

"My name? It's Homura," She gave another smile as she dragged one of her taloned fingers down her right cheek, "Though, I know all about you, (y/n)."

"What do you want with me, then?"

This 'Homura' woman was partially propped up from a water entrance, her mid-thighs exposed to the air and revealing dark orange scales that started a few inches below her waist-line, the coloration almost a burnt orange. The same color of scales were growing from her arms, beginning just below her

elbow and fading out towards her fingers, looking similar to long fingerless gloves.

"Hmm," She put an index finger to her lips in thought, "The short answer would be to teach you a lesson about trying to trifle with my business."

"(Y/n), no one really told you?" Todomatsu sounded right next to me, his arm wrapping around my shoulders, "Homura is the one that made us like this."

"

You

gave them this curse?" I stared in shock at the woman.

"Ooh, that's a good look--" She didn't answer, instead putting her index fingers and thumbs together, as if she was taking a mental picture of me. I narrowed my eyes, gripping something hard tightly in my right hand before throwing it at her. Homura had a brief look of surprise before a large hex bolt collided with her forehead, knocking her head back a bit.

"

You're

the one that's caused me all of this trouble!" I shoved Todomatsu's arm off of me, "I would've been fine if you had just left them alone!"

She recovered from the hit, glaring at me with some blood trickling over her left eye before rushing towards me, much faster than I anticipated. Homura grabbed a fistful of my hair and dragged me towards the hole she was in, dunking me under and shoving me against the floor of some kind of hallway that was completely submerged, about three meters away from the room. I managed to keep my breath, reaching back and trying to twist her right arm, keeping the tension tight.

"Don't blame

me

for the mistakes

you

made!" She cried out, biting down on my left arm. The pain was harsh and sharp, but I kept my grip on her arm, the angle awkward with her close.

"Oh, I could watch this all day--" Todomatsu whined as he moved between Homura and I, forcing her off of me and pressing my chest up against one of the walls close by, "...but she's still

my kill

, Homura..."

"Let me get some punishment in! She tried to take my Jyushi away from me!"

"He's still yours, you know. She tried, but I was able to stop her from further contact," I felt Todomatsu's mouth against the back of my neck, his lips dancing across my skin. I squirmed as much as I could, wanting to get away and take a breath.

"And I appreciate that...Just let me have a bite afterwards."

"Of course."

I cried out in pain as his teeth sunk into my neck, releasing all of my air as I involuntarily took a breath in, catching a small bit of water in my lungs before I closed my mouth. I threw my head back, feeling it make contact with Todomatsu's skull and forcing him to release me. Kicking away from the two merfolk, I breached the room with air, coughing and sputtering as I dragged myself away from the opening, trying to find something sharp for a defensive weapon.

"(Y/n)...you know that this can be done the easy way, or the hard way..." Todomatsu's head partially broke the surface of the water, his eyes

sweeping over my spasming form.

"Fuck...off...I'll fight you to the death..."

"Such spunk. Where was that at the beach?" He pulled himself up, hand over hand.

"Wouldn't you like to know...?"

How could I have told Karamatsu and the others of how I wanted to kill their youngest brother? I'd rather have them think of me as a failure than a murderer...

"This makes the game much more fun," He reached out to grab my leg before retracting his hand as I swung at it with a small L-beam, the metal almost completely rusted through.

"If you think this is a game, then you're more twisted than I thought," I threw the small beam at him, missing but instantly replacing it with a long hex bolt I felt underneath me. His face went from a happy smile to a neutral look in the blink of an eye.

"Fine...Then I'll do this quickly," He made a small motion with his hand, and the water rushed to fill the room through the rusted joints. I took what breath I could before it rose above my head, the bubbles blocking my vision.

"I'll miss you, (y/n), but I'll ensure that you last just a little bit longer inside me."

A burning pain entered my right side, radiating out in waves as I felt someone's hand

inside

my rib cage. I drove the bolt down towards where I thought the arm was before I felt the hand start squeezing my right lung. The dark blue of the water was replaced by crimson red, my body begging to stop feeling this excruciating pain as the air forced its way up my throat.

"They say that a diver's pride is their lungs," Homura chimed out, "Make sure to eat those. They could be full of what you need, Totty..."

A sharp tug within my ribs ripped a garbled and painful scream from my throat, the hand pulling out of my side and the cavity filling with sea water in its absence.

I was dying...I had to be at this point...

"Mmm...it's not that bad," Todomatsu swam in front of me with a hunk of something organic, biting into it like an apple, "Definitely rich in taste."

My vision was fading fast, and my diaphragm wasn't working anymore...most likely torn when Todomatsu pulled some of my lungs out. I felt my body get tugged in different directions, but didn't feel any more pain as I closed my eyes.

"It's about time! You kept me waiting a lot longer than last time," A familiar voice called out to me, a calm warmth washing over my body. A hand lightly pressed against my back as I turned to the speaker while opening my eyes. His silhouette was black against the dark blue sky, black clouds speeding by overhead as if time was being accelerated, but his eyes were visible against his own shadow.

"You're--" A name flickered to life in my head before he put an index finger to his mouth while slightly closing his eyes, the sickly green glow of his irises bright against the white sclera.

"Shh...You've been through a lot this go-around, (y/n)," He removed his hand from my back and gently took my own hand in the same motion, "Just relax for now, and I'll take care of the rest."

I couldn't help but smile as I followed his instructions, the memory of what had happened in the water fading away into nothingness.

Chapter 24 - Osomatsu's Ending

A name made itself known in my head, reminding me of the one I chose.

"With that in mind, I choose--"

I cut myself off, walking towards the red merman next to the breakwater. His face became more alert as my feet stopped right in front of him, my body kneeling down to meet his eye level. Pulling out the corded vial from underneath my shirt collar, I let it hang freely between the two of us as the sunlight caught the red hues of the coral still contained within.

"You, Osomatsu."

His lips twisted into a wide smirk as soon as his name left my mouth.

"(Y/n), you can't be serious!" Choromatsu scoffed, closely followed by Ichimatsu clicking his tongue in disgust.

"Well, there's not much that we can do when a lady makes up her mind," Karamatsu shrugged his shoulders before turning towards Osomatsu, "Don't mess up this second chance, eldest brother."

"He's probably the worst choice she could've made!" Choromatsu pointed at the lionfish merman who didn't seem affected at all by what they were saying, his arms crossed underneath his head like a cushion against the sand as his expression fully revealed the bliss and contentment Osomatsu was feeling.

I glanced over towards the opposite breakwater, accidently meeting a furious pink glare full of hate and fury. I couldn't tear my eyes away as Todomatsu held my stare, the glow in his eyes getting brighter with intensity. The argument between Choromatsu and Karamatsu continued, but the words didn't reach my ears anymore.

"We made a deal," I heard Todomatsu's voice bounce around in my head, cutting through the muffled conversation, "Now get over here!"

"I won't--" My voice was raspy as my throat suddenly went dry, "I didn't...say your name."

"Then say it

now

!" His voice grew more and more angry with each word, biting down on the last syllable like a command.

"No!" I tried to scream out, but couldn't hear my own voice against the sudden ringing silence in my ears. I felt a hard tug on my left hand, breaking through the fog in my head and drawing my focus down to see what was clinging to me. Osomatsu had intertwined his fingers with mine, our arms fully stretched out as if I had tried to walk away from him. His stern eyes met mine and I realized what had happened by the thick red outlining his dark hues.

Todomatsu tried to charm me...and succeeded.

"Where are you going?" The soft question didn't match the hidden fury in Osomatsu's eyes.

"Nowhere now--" I pointedly looked towards where Todomatsu was, moving back to Osomatsu and sitting in front of him as I clung to his hand like a lifeline, "I got distracted by something."

He looked towards the other breakwater, narrowing his eyes seemingly in understanding. When Osomatsu looked back at me, the red glow in his eyes was gone.

"Well, don't worry about it."

The conversation between Choromatsu and Karamatsu had stopped when Osomatsu first spoke, the air losing its tension as the brothers slowly left the beach. Jyushimatsu and Ichimatsu left first, disappearing underwater

and heading out to the deep ocean. Karamatsu excused himself and vanished into the house, leaving Choromatsu at his post, keeping silent while Osomatsu, Todomatsu, and I remained.

"Want to go for a swim, (y/n)?" Osomatsu asked suddenly, his hand still holding mine. I looked at him, an eyebrow raised.

"I don't really have the right gear for that--"

"It's fine. We'll stay at the surface," He closed his eyes while giving a confident smile. I nervously glanced over at Todomatsu still on the other side of the small lagoon, avoiding looking into his eyes. I felt Osomatsu squeeze my hand gently, "Nothing's going to happen."

"Okay..." I followed his lead into the water, feeling his tail rub against my leg as I entered the deeper water. Once I started treading water, Osomatsu let go of my hand and moved between myself and where Todomatsu was, cutting off my line of sight to the pink merman.

"I wanted to say that I'm sorry," The look in Osomatsu's gaze was far away, as if he was thinking about something serious, "I've been brash and pushy with you since we first met. You may not have liked it, but I've done my best to keep you safe without smothering you. You made it clear that night on the docks of what you wanted, and I would've gotten an earful from Karamatsu if I did anything other than your wishes."

His face was calm and relaxed as his eyes moved to gaze at the blue afternoon sky, the white clouds lazily drifting by. I stopped moving forward and put a hand on the slick rock near the breakwater point, watching his form slowly pass by.

"Osomatsu..." The tone in my voice made him look over sharply, the water rippling out around him, "Do you even see me for who I am or just for what I'm wearing?"

"(Y/n)..." Osomatsu swam closer, reaching out to cup my right cheek as a worried look crossed his face, "I see you for you. I can't help it that you're hot as hell, and sexy as fuck to boot. I mean, my coral getting traded around

only for you to wear it? I consider myself the luckiest man alive!" The worried look melted into a happy grin, "The fact that you're a diver means that I get to see you in cute-looking swimwear whenever you visit me!"

My blushing face felt hot against his cold hand, but something in his words caught my attention.

"You said 'visit'...Not even a few nights ago, you offered to turn me into a mermaid," I looked into his eyes for an answer, "Which one is it?"

"It's still on the table, if you'd like," He moved his hand away, "I was just thinking that...you'd want more time to stay as you are...I mean, you'd probably ask if I didn't mention anything."

"That does sound like something I'd do," I give a light laugh, "But I've already settled everything that I need to do here. If I ask for more time, then I'm going to start double-guessing my choice."

Osomatsu's face lit up with a bright smile that reached his eyes. He pulled away from me with a cry of jubilation, jumping up and hitting the water surface with his back. I couldn't see what he was doing underwater, and couldn't help but laugh at the motions resembling fistpumps.

"Oh, hurray for you," I flinched as Todomatsu called out mockingly, feeling a tail brush against my left leg as his voice came closer, "Too bad that by choosing our eldest brother, you do nothing to change the curse."

"...what do you mean?" I avoided his eyes as the pink merman tried to make eye contact with me.

"Oh, you should know. Osomatsu had nothing to do with the curse, so he won't be able to do anything

about

it," Todomatsu wedged himself between my arm and the breakwater, forcing me to back away into open water, "I thought you were smarter than that, little (y/n)."

His taloned hand reached for my cheek before something splashed out from under the water, grabbing his wrist and lifting it towards the air as the body followed, shoving me away and pushing Todomatsu back. I couldn't see his face but Osomatsu's body was tense, the fins trailing up his spine shivering with either excitement or anger. I pushed myself away from the two, feeling a violent aura begin to emanate from them.

"Let go of my hand, Osomatsu."

"I'd rather not," Osomatsu growled in response.

"I wasn't going to do anything to (y/n), okay?" Todomatsu grunted as he tried to pull away, "Just a pat on the cheek."

Osomatsu remained silent before letting go, swiftly moving over next to me, "I've already warned you twice, Totty...don't try anything again."

Todomatsu glared at his older brother before moving his eyes to me, a chill running down my spine at the violent mixture of emotions within the pink hues. With a flourish of his large tail, Todomatsu swam away, diving under the surface and disappearing into the dark waters.

Letting out a sigh, Osomatsu turned towards me with a slight smile on his face.

"Sorry about that...it's hard to deal with brothers that aren't quite 'all there'."

"Do you know how it happened?" I reached out to his left shoulder, feeling my left leg cramp up a little. He looked away in thought.

"The curse? Not really much..." Osomatsu looked back down and hooked an arm around my waist, supporting me completely, "All we knew was that it started with Jyushimatsu. We never really kept tabs on where the others were, or what they were doing until this started."

He moved back towards the breakwater, allowing me to perch myself against it.

"I don't think any of us told you...we used to rule the major seas before this happened," He rubbed an index finger under his nose, wearing a prideful look on his face.

"Really?" I raised an eyebrow, my tone taking on a doubtful note.

"Yeah! I was in control of the Pacific while my brothers were spread throughout the different oceans. I think Jyushimatsu was travelling around the Indian Ocean, but he started acting weird after he visited my waters..."

"And why are you telling me this...?"

"If I know you...you still want to help, don't you?" He cocked an eyebrow towards me, a mischievous look on his face, "Why not take a look around to see how and where it started?"

I could only stare at Osomatsu for a moment before speaking.

"It takes a purpose-built ship with precise tools and equipment months to scout out a small area of the ocean floor! What makes you think that

we

could do it in less?" My mind reeled at the monetary costs of chartering a private ship to find Osomatsu's proposed needle in a haystack. I didn't have a lot of money to my name, and no job would be able to pay me what I needed in that short amount of time.

"We take a chance," Osomatsu put a hand on top of my head, his grin still present, "I've never turned someone into a mermaid before, so who knows if you'll get some kind of ability like us! You wouldn't need that clunky surface-based equipment, and you wouldn't have to worry about drowning or being crushed by the water depth."

"You had made it sound like you did it all the time before, and only now you're telling me this?" I pushed some water towards his face, scoffing playfully, "Do you even know how to start?"

"I've kissed you and nothing happened, so I'm guessing that it probably has to do with blood," Osomatsu shook his head a little, shrugging off the splash, "And since Karamatsu had used his on you earlier with no sign of you turning, it's probably ingestion."

"So, you're saying that I have to drink your blood..."

"Probably..."

"That sounds gross...but let's give it a try," I took a deep breath before looking towards the breakwater, hoping to find a small stone that was sharp enough to cut through skin. As my hand reached out to a stone that looked the appropriate size, I felt Osomatsu's hands on my shoulders before he turned me around and sealed my lips in a deep kiss. I cried out in muffled surprise, trying to return the kiss as I felt his tongue force my lips open. A warm liquid rushed into my open mouth, catching me off-guard and swallowing some of it before pulling away, coughing and sputtering.

He quickly helped me back to the breakwater, staying close with a tense look on his face as blood trickled out of the corner of his mouth.

Did he bite through his cheek or tongue...?

"Osoma--!" I tried to chide him before I felt my heart shift in my chest, a warm pain flooding my body as I found myself suddenly out of breath. My heartbeat thudded in my ears as the pain escalated into torture, the warmth growing hotter to what felt like a raging inferno. The water surrounding me started to heat up, steam wafting into the air as the salt water touched my skin. I couldn't think straight anymore, losing my grip on the breakwater and slipping into the ocean.

"...n)...!" A faint voice partially called out my name. My body was sore, my mind was tired, and I couldn't be bothered to move.

".../n)!"

My name again...I think.

The bed underneath me was soft to the touch as I reached out to bring my blanket over me. No fabric met my fingers, instead rubbing against something that held onto my hand.

"...ta wake up..."

I weakly opened my eyes to see two...no, three worried faces hovering over me, the sunlight behind them reflected through the high trees. They all looked similar to the other, one of them was wearing a shirt while the other two were content with their chests bare. As my eyes finally focused on their faces, I recognized the eldest three of the sextuplets.

"...what happened...?" I groaned as I rubbed my free hand against my face.

"The short story? It worked," Osomatsu gave my hand a gentle squeeze, "Long story? You've been out for nearly a whole day underwater after you changed."

"Underwater...? There's no way that's possible. A human can't--" I sat up to realize all three brothers weren't standing on the ground, each of them hovering in the air around me.

Not air...water...

I took in a small breath, feeling the liquid rush down my throat and into my lungs. There was no uncomfortable feeling, no sensation of drowning. A rush of excitement shoved my confusion out of my mind, a smile rising on my face as I looked at Osomatsu. His face mirrored my own, like a parent proud of their child, as he lifted me off of the sandbed.

"You look great, (l/n)," Karamatsu moved away as I righted myself, looking down at my legs before meeting my eyes, "If you're happy with this, then I am, too."

"I was kinda expecting something close to Osomatsu, since he was the one that gave you his blood," Choromatsu had a slight frown on his face, "But I

guess that this is all right."

I closed my eyes before tilting my head down, opening them and staring at the tail underneath me, the double fins growing out where my ankles used to be. The membranes were partially transparent near the edge, becoming more bold with a colored hue as they grew closer to the tail, the bright coloration mingling with reds and oranges beautifully. The red and orange scales were sparse along the colored tail, fading into the skin near my natural waist in a seamless transition. Two pectoral fins jutted out on both sides of my hips, complemented by smaller pectoral fins just underneath that matched the colors of the tail fins.

I raised my free hand to my face, seeing a thin membrane attached to the back that trailed off to behind my shoulder, creating a larger replica of the long pectoral fins on my upper body. Osomatsu released my other hand as I tried to start moving around, getting used to the feel of one limb instead of two.

"I look like a veiltail goldfish--!" I tried to look behind me, partially seeing the dorsal fin flexing near the small of my back, the gown-line tails trailing behind me.

"Oh, won't Totty have a fit over this?" Osomatsu tried to hide a laugh behind his hand.

"Let me get used to this first, and then we can talk about everything else..." I warned as I moved my hands across my new body, the muscles still sore from the changes. The shorts that I had worn were completely gone, either shredded from the change or absorbed somehow.

"I can help you out on the way," Osomatsu took both of my hands and pulled me along, keeping his venomous spikes pinned to his sides, "The first spot I had in mind isn't very far."

"Wait--" I pulled away awkwardly, moving my new tail moving in a weird direction to counteract my forward movement. I turned to the other two brothers at a slightly odd angle before straightening out, "I want to thank

you both for everything -- especially you, Karamatsu. I don't think I would've gotten this far without you."

"Don't worry about it, (l/n)," Karamatsu paddled forward, his fingers lightly grazing the top of my head, "I did what anyone would've done. Go finish what Jyushimatsu started."

"Ehh," Choromatsu sighed while looking away, "You can visit as often as Osomatsu will let you."

"Not happening!" I heard Osomatsu huff behind me.

"All right, I'll take you up on the offer," I laughed before I was pulled away towards the open ocean, waving to the two brothers before I lost sight of them. Osomatsu clicked his tongue in slight annoyance, focusing back on the destination.

Throughout the weeks of travelling to the site that Osomatsu was confident in as a starting search point, I learned to better maneuver with the tail and became used to switching between air and water. Osomatsu only told me that my lungs had been 'redesigned' to breathe water, the many tubes probably growing something similar to the gills on an axolotl, the passageways covered with tiny filaments that lay down when introduced to air. I found it fascinating before realizing the effort it took to switch from one form of oxygen to another, remembering what Karamatsu had gone through in the labs.

Osomatsu tested my speed, as he was worried that my 'flashy' tail fins wouldn't serve much function other than for show, and seemed to change his mind a little after I could barely keep up with him. I had removed the shirt long ago, finding out that I had scales covering the majority of my breasts and upper torso, much to Osomatsu's disappointment.

I was able to glean some information from him about the events leading up to Jyushimatsu's fall, or rather, the lack of details. He had mentioned that there was someone else besides the brothers that had lived just as long as them -- a self-proclaimed sea witch named Homura.

He had forgotten about her until he had talked about Jyushimatsu finding a potential mate, a human one, before Homura forced herself into the picture. There was no mention of the human female after she entered the picture, and Jyushimatsu went to visit the sea witch multiple times near Osomatsu's territory. We had decided that her location was a better place to start, changing our original trajectory to find the shipwreck she had called home.

"Hold up..." Osomatsu slowed down as we neared a deep ridge, peering over the edge to see a large freighter wreck that had seen much better days. I glanced at what I could see of the forecastle, but the painted name of the wreck was heavily obscured by marine life that found a home amongst the metal framework.

"Is this it?" I kept my voice low, realizing that he had never treated the previous wrecks with this much caution.

"Yeah," He pushed himself off the edge and swam downwards, clinging to the ocean floor as much as he could. I followed in his wake, trying to keep my profile low. The light from the surface wasn't enough to pierce the darkness below, and made our red coloration hard to see against the sand.

"Want me to go with the plan?" I whispered next to him, and he nodded before I pushed myself out of the hiding spot we had found near a gaping hole in the hull. Now closer to the freighter, I could see some of the name practically buried by wildlife.

...edan.

--edan? Medan...The

SS Ourang Medan

?! What's a ghost ship doing here?

I kept calm on the outside, partially freaked out about the rumored ghost ship that was laying in front of me, presumably just as dead as the crew was when it was first discovered floating on the open ocean.

"...hello...?" I called out, following the plan that Osomatsu thought of while we were searching for the wreckage. I was to see if this Homura person knew anything of what had happened, and my coral would tell him the answer. If I made it out untouched, then she had nothing to do with it -- but the guilty usually acted out when confronted about their actions.

I heard a loud metallic 'clang' echo from deeper within the wreck, slightly flinching at the sudden sound while making my way through the tight corridors of the ship. The passage opened up into a large storage area, possibly for cargo but it was completely devoid of anything deeming it as such. There were no rotted containers, no collapsing vehicles -- even the usual bulkhead lockers were removed from the area to create an empty space that was large enough to fit a few semi-trucks in.

"Well, well," A light voice called out from above me, making me look upwards to see a young woman lounging across a support I-beam, "Hello there. What brings you to my home?"

I kept silent for a few moments before answering, realizing that the tail she had wasn't like the ones I'd seen any of the brothers have. It was impossibly long, wrapped around many other beams, loosely coiled like a party streamer. The brown scales were barely visible in the low-light environment, hiding its true length in shadow. Her forearms were covered in the same scales, and her hair was tied in a long braid that hovered behind her.

"Ah, I'm here to get a few answers...I'm kinda new to this whole 'mermaid' thing, and was told of a curse?" I told her what I thought she needed to hear, "A merman warned me of it, and I was worried that it would spread to me."

"New?" She slipped down from her perch, her tail acting as an additional limb like that of a monkey, "I've never really heard of mermaids just...popping into existence before. Usually, they're created."

"Now, that's the first I've heard of something," I raised an eyebrow, "If they did, then how did you come into being?"

"That's a question I've been wondering myself," She reached the deck of the room, moving closer to me cautiously, "So, this 'curse' you ask of...did the merman who warned you about it tell you of anything?"

"Only that if I had any questions to direct them to you. He didn't really provide me with any answers," I kept my eye on her as she moved around me in a circle, almost like a predator. I willed myself to stay calm, to play the part of a worried person instead of the anxious bait for the larger predator outside, "His scales were green, if you needed to know."

"Ah, Choromatsu. He's such a sweet merman, despite being tethered to that wicked human who refuses to die," She raised a hand to her chin, stopping to my left, "If you know of him, then do you know of the

other

human female? She's been stalking his home for the past few days, and making his brothers' lives miserable."

How would she know...?

"I...haven't been around for that long," I kept my eyes on her, "Is she really that big of a problem?"

"Well, you would know that best, wouldn't you...(y/n)?" A male voice mocked in a whining tone behind me, wrapping his arms around my shoulders before I could move. Grunting, I tried to shove him off of me, scratching at the man's arms and throwing myself backwards towards the closest wall.

"I thought you were smarter than that..." A familiar pink glow grew in intensity behind me, still holding tight as I felt his head rub against mine before jerking back, the necklace holding Osomatsu's coral suddenly tight against the front of my neck. I gagged as I struggled against him, seeing the coral begin to glow as the hemp cord tightened over my neck.

"I had figured--" Homura drew closer, her steel-grey eyes glowing in the darkness as she looked down at the glass vial, "You carry his claim so

blatantly, and still tried to play me for a fool? I know why you're here, and I'm not changing anything."

"Why...?" I coughed out as the hemp necklace pressed against my throat, almost cutting off my breathing. I had to hold on until Osomatsu got here...I needed to.

"Did you just think that you could waltz in and be the hero for those in need?" The sea witch swam closer, her eel-like tail more defined in the red glow, "Well, now that you're this...abomination...you can't really do anything to get rid of the curse anymore."

Todomatsu laughed softly behind me as a partially confused look crossed my face.

"You see...it can only be broken by a human," She wagged her finger in my face, lightly touching my nose as her eyes slightly closed, "You're no longer a problem for me, but I don't mind getting rid of you--"

"Now, that's a problem for

me,

" I heard Osomatsu's dark voice growl out from next to us, hearing a snap before the pressure on my throat was released as a rush of water passed behind me, "No more warnings, Totty!"

I tried to back away from Homura as her expression changed from shock to fury, lunging out at me with her wicked talons, her teeth long and jagged as she shrieked. I shoved her hands away from my face as my back hit the wall I had pinned Todomatsu to, quickly rolling to the side as she rushed me again. Ducking around her torso, I swam towards the opposite side of the room, keeping an eye out for anything that could be used as a weapon while staying away from the screeching males, their similar colors illuminating the room. A glint of exposed metal caught my eye, diving down to pull a small rusted pole from the sand-covered deck and quickly turning to ward off an advancing Homura.

"

Tenetur per sanguinem...

" Her voice echoed in my head, the noise scratching my brain like nails on a chalkboard.

"(Y/n)...!" I thought I heard Osomatsu yell out my name.

"

...tenetur ad creatorem

!" Homura's cry overpowered Osomatsu's warning as a fierce light flooded the room, partially blinding me and leaving me helpless against a sudden force that threw me across the room. A foggy feeling swarmed my mind, familiar to when Todomatsu had tried to charm me.

Todomatsu? He wouldn't do anything to harm me.

"

In praeceptis meis ordines

," I heard Homura clearly, despite not understanding a word she uttered.

No, I had to fight this...!

But why? She never harmed me.

I could only watch as my body stopped responding to what I wanted to do, the sea witch grabbing my throat tightly and slamming my head against the deck below us.

She wouldn't do anything to hurt me.

I still felt the pole in my hand, willing myself to tighten my grip.

Homura is like a mother to me.

'

Tighter. Tighter...Tighter!'

The voice in my head was enough to drive me mad, reminding me over and over that I was loved by Homura, she wouldn't harm me despite her fury being unleashed on my body, that she was family and I shouldn't disobey her word.

'Tighter...!'

I felt my right hand flinch, finally tightening around the pole in a firm grip. I didn't know how to counter any kind of spell, but everything panics when it bleeds.

'Forward. Forward. Forward.'

I kept up the mantra, screaming it in my head as the other voice rose to counteract what I was telling myself, promising that listening to Homura was in my best interest.

"Todomatsu, do you need help...?" Homura looked away from me briefly, towards where the two mermen were still fighting. I smelled blood in the water.

'Forward. Forward...! Forward, dammit!'

My right arm suddenly jutted forward, plunging the pole into Homura's side. She screamed in pain before she wrenched herself away from me, trying to pull the rusted metal out. The other voice in my head instantly stopped, providing a blissful quiet in my own head. I gathered my thoughts quickly, rushing forward from my laying position to chase after Homura, my hands grabbing the pole she was trying to pull out and shoving it in deeper.

"...no..!" I heard Todomatsu cry out from somewhere before the sea witch glared at me, starting to open her mouth before I clamped my left hand over

her lips, my fingernails digging into her cheeks to prevent her from speaking as my eyes went wide with anger.

"None...of that hoo-doo voo-doo bullshit!" I screamed as I angled the pole downwards, moving my tail violently to gather speed before she and I crashed into the deck below us, the metal groaning and snapping under our weight. Homura clawed at my face, panic rising in her eyes as I kept the momentum, swimming faster and deeper into the belly of the wreck. Her blood began pouring from the wound, leaving a trail behind us. I couldn't tell where we were, but I didn't care.

Homura had tried to kill me, and I no longer needed to worry about drowning. I was on an even playing field with her.

We hit the bottom of whatever room we were in, both of us slamming into the ground with the crunch of metal. She screamed in agony as I avoided impaling myself on the pole, twisting out of the way and floating away from her. Her tail thrashed around, the eel-like shape slamming into objects and throwing about debris as she tried to free herself. The pole had lodged into the floor, practically pinning her down through her side.

"You

bitch

!" Homura focused on me, a vicious snarl on her face, "You don't know what you've done!"

I braced myself as her tail slammed into me, unable to stop myself from hitting several shelves and falling over with them. A jolt of pain shot up my tail, making me cry out before looking down to see it pinned between two heavy shelves, trapping my tail up to where my knees used to be.

"You'll pay for taking them away from me...!" She tried furiously to rip the pole from her side, eventually trying to just lift herself off of its length, "You've ruined

everything

! You took them away from me!!"

I tried to shove the shelves off before she got free, the awkward angle making it difficult to lift while avoiding the falling debris from the ceiling we had crashed through.

"If only you hadn't been born!" She continued her threats, "I would've been happy with

him! You'll never get your happy ending because of this! NEV--!

"

Her shrieks were suddenly silenced as a large chunk of deck plating fell on her, her tail falling limp from its previous thrashing. A short moment of quiet filled the room before a loud hum echoed in the chamber, vibrating against the metal around me and shaking my body as a brilliant gray light spread in a burst from underneath the deck plating. I heard someone shouting in pain from somewhere above, but couldn't figure out who it was before the hum echoed louder and louder, threatening to shake apart the wreck as more debris fell around me. It was all I could do to shield my head with my arms, feeling things cut and scrape by my body. I could see flashes of red through the ceiling before a collapsed pipe interrupted my view.

".../n)...!"

"Down here!" I called out as I tried to free myself again, the shelves starting to become more heavy as debris collapsed onto them. Panic rose in my throat as the metal underneath me groaned, as if the new weight on the floor was too much. I didn't want to be dragged down further.

"Hold on," I looked up to see Osomatsu streak towards me, his eyes glowing red in the dark, "I've got you--"

He slowed down in front of me, his hands pushing some of the debris away from me as he looked me over. A frown settled onto his lips as his hands pulled at the shelves pinning my tail down, wedging himself into a better position and shoving it off effortlessly. Without wasting a second, he

grabbed my arms and pulled me upwards, swimming through the larger hole and out of the crumbling wreck.

Once we were a safe distance away, the tension left his body and Osomatsu looked down at me with a soft smile. Only in the partial natural light could I see the state he was in.

He bore fresh cuts and scratches along his face and torso, three of them crossing over his left eye and causing it to turn a semi-milky color. His right ear had some of the lobe missing, matching teeth marks showing where Todomatsu had bitten him along his neck and jawline. Blood faintly trailed from a deep gash on his chest, crossing from his left shoulder to his right pectoral muscle. His hands and fingertips were stained with the remains of blood, though it was being washed away by the water current.

His tail was a mess. The membranes between some of his spines were torn, while his first three dorsal spines were completely broken and hanging on by his skin. The pectoral fins were also badly damaged, the beautiful 'fingers' of each fin now frayed and cut in many places.

"Osomatsu..." I tried to keep from crying as I took in his state, holding him close in a hug, "I'm so sorry...!"

"What for?" His usual cheery voice asked, making me look up to see his trademark smirk visible on his face, "I was the one that came up with that shitty plan."

"I didn't want you getting hurt--" I buried my face against his chest, feeling him rub my back gently.

"I've got some kickass scars now. That's all," Osomatsu's voice rumbled against my head, "I think that you were able to do it..."

"How...?"

"Well, it hurt like hell after you both disappeared. But then I just felt this pain well up and vanish," He rested his head on mine.

"Then...why do your eyes still have that glow?" I ducked under his head and looked at his eyes in worry.

"Hmm...not sure," A mischievous look crossed his face as he lowered his eyelids, the glow becoming more intense, "Why? Do you like it?"

I blushed and looked away, "...maybe..."

Osomatsu lowered his head to meet my eyes, the hooded look still present, "Wanna see what else I can do?"

I shoved his head away and pulled from his embrace, both embarrassed and worried about sudden company. He seemed to notice what I was thinking.

"I...dealt with Totty, and since the curse is probably gone, then Homura is most likely gone, too..." His hands moved over my shoulders towards my bare neck, the necklace long forgotten in the wreck, "I'll give you another one...one that's meant for you."

"Is that it, then...?" I looked towards the wreck, hearing the metal grind against itself.

"For now," Osomatsu pulled me back into a hug, "If a problem comes out of this, then we'll deal with it...together."

His lips kissed my left cheek before I looked towards him, giving him a full kiss.

"Am I able to cash in my payments yet?" He raised an eyebrow in question, the look he gave causing me to laugh a little.

"Maybe in a few days. Give me some time to relax..."